Instructor’s Manual

COPPILES THERAPY
An Introduction

with Ellyn Bader, PhD and Dan Wile, PhD

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Tips for Making the Best Use of the DVD

1. USE THE TRANSCRIPTS
Make notes in the video Transcript for future reference; the next time you show the video you will have them available. Highlight or notate key moments in the video to better facilitate discussion during the video and post-viewing.

2. FACILITATE DISCUSSION
Pause the video at different points throughout the interview to elicit viewers’ observations and reactions to the concepts presented. The Discussion Questions provide ideas about key points that can stimulate rich discussions and learning.

3. LET IT FLOW
Allow the interview to play out so viewers can appreciate the flow of the conversation. It is best to watch the full video since issues untouched in earlier parts of the interview may be covered later. Encourage the viewers to voice their opinions; no therapist is perfect! What do viewers think works and does not work in the therapists’ approaches? It is crucial for students and therapists to develop the ability to effectively critique others’ work as well as their own.

4. SUGGEST READINGS TO ENRICH VIDEO MATERIAL
Assign readings from Suggestions for Further Readings and Websites prior to viewing. You can also time the video to coincide with other course or training materials on related topics.

5. ASSIGN A REACTION PAPER
See suggestions in Reaction Paper section.

6. INVITE ROLE-PLAYS
In this video, the therapists discuss ways of working with couples around a variety of issues. Ask viewers to select points brought out in the video that they would like to practice.
After watching the video, organize participants into groups of four. Participants take turns practicing key points they want to work on by playing the therapist in a brief (5-10 minute) role-play. Each role-play shall consist of one therapist, one couple and one observer. You can stop after one round or have each participant play the role of therapist, then have the groups come together to discuss the exercise. Open up a general discussion on what participants learned about doing couples therapy, what was positive about the experience and what was hard for them.

PERSPECTIVE ON VIDEOS AND THE PERSONALITY OF THE THERAPIST

Every psychotherapy is unique, influenced as much by the personality and style of the therapist as by the use of specific techniques and theories. Thus, while we can certainly pick up ideas from master therapists, each viewer must make the best use of relevant theory, technique and research that fits their own personal style and the needs of their clients.
Interview Questions

Interview questions are presented in the order they appear in the video.

1. People often wonder if couples therapy can help them. They may have been struggling for years with problems. They may feel really stuck. How can couples therapy help them?

2. What kind of growth do you see in couples therapy? What kind of changes are possible?

3. Often times, even though the couple knows they’re in big trouble, that one person may even be then thinking, ‘This could be the end of this,’ one or both parties may be reluctant to come in. Why do you think that is? And how can they be helped to overcome that?

4. Do you think that the therapist must be more active in couples therapy?

5. A big problem people come in with sometimes is that one person says, ‘I think the problem is them.’ The other person thinks the problem is the other person, and the goal of therapy is to fix the other person. How do you help people deal with this thing that seemingly can cycle endlessly?

6. Another thing that couples seem to worry about is when one person seems more committed than the other. They may be more committed to the marriage or the relationship, and they have a strong disagreement on what to do about it. How does couples therapy help them with this issue?

7. Do you see any differences between men and women in general? Do men and women come in with any different sorts of problems?

8. Sometimes, in a committed long-term relationship, it is not uncommon for intimacy or sexuality to break down. Is this something that’s important for the couple to bring up in therapy, and how do you deal with that?

9. What can a couple do to get the most benefit from being in couples therapy?
10. You said something about how a partner will assume the other person can’t handle or deal with something they are about to say. Can you say more about how that works?

11. How does the couple know if this couples therapist is right for them? If it’s a good fit or a bad fit?

12. Are there times when you see members of the couple individually? And when might that be?

13. If you meet with a person individually and secrets are revealed, do you keep it private? How does confidentiality work in these situations?

14. Does therapy help people? What kind of help can people expect from it? How many people do get better when they come in for couples counseling?

15. What do you say to couples when they come in and ask, ‘How long will therapy take’?

16. What do you most enjoy about working with couples?

17. What moved you to be in this video, participating and talking to couples who are either considering couples therapy or are already in it?
Group Discussion Questions

Professors, training directors or facilitators may use a few or all of these discussion questions keyed to certain elements of the video or those issues most relevant to the viewers.

1. **Something New:** Can you imagine working with a couple that has been stuck in a serious, negative pattern for many years? How do you see yourself bringing in something new?

2. **Communication:** How do you balance talking about communication problems and strategies without becoming lost in or overwhelmed by the content of the couple’s life issues (e.g., sex, money or child-rearing problems)? What’s hard for you about this?

3. **Homework:** How do you feel about using homework in therapy? What aspects of homework are you more comfortable with? Less comfortable?

4. **Goals:** How do you go about setting goals with the couple that comes in highly emotionally charged? In what ways are you likely to be thrown off? What might be particularly challenging for you about this?

5. **Motivation:** Do you agree with the premise that a more motivated partner can bring the less motivated one into the process? Why or why not? How do you feel sitting with a couple where one is clearly more committed to the process than the other?

6. **Individual Sessions:** What do you think about seeing partners individually during the course of couples therapy? What about before or after a course of couples therapy? What are the pros and cons of keeping or not keeping secrets? Which way do you personally feel most comfortable?

7. **Separation:** If you were working with a couple that had decided to separate, would you feel comfortable working to help them have a better separation? Might feelings of self-doubt come up for you as a therapist if your clients did not stay together? Where would you go with that?
8. **Duration:** What do you think is an appropriate length of time for a couple to be in therapy? Do you answer the question differently for individual therapy? If yes, why? How do you feel about couples coming back to therapy multiple times? What does this say about the success of the treatment?
Reaction Paper for Classrooms and Training

- **Assignment:** Complete the reaction paper and return it by the date noted by the professor or facilitator.

- **Suggestions for Viewers:** Take notes on these questions while viewing the video and complete the reaction paper afterwards or use the questions as a way to approach discussion. Respond to each question below.

- **Length and Style:** 2-4 pages double-spaced. Be brief and concise. Do NOT provide a full synopsis of the video. This is meant to be a brief reaction paper that you write soon after watching the video--we want your ideas and reactions.

**What to Write:** Respond to the following questions in your reaction paper:

1. **Key points:** What important points did you learn about working with couples? What stands out in how these therapists talk about their work?

2. **What I am resistant to.** What issues/principles/strategies did you find yourself having resistance to, or what approaches made you feel uncomfortable? Did any techniques or interactions push your buttons? What interventions would you be least likely to apply in your work? Explore these questions.

3. **What I found most helpful.** What was most beneficial to you as a therapist about the models presented? What tools or perspectives did you find helpful and might you use in your own work?

4. **How I would do it differently.** What might you do differently than therapists in the video in terms of how you would approach couples work? Be specific in what different approaches, strategies and techniques you might apply. What other questions would you have asked these therapists if you could ask them more questions?

5. **Other Questions/Reactions:** What questions or reactions did you have as you viewed the therapy in the video? Other comments, thoughts or feelings?
Suggestions for Further Readings, Websites and Videos

BOOKS


WEB RESOURCES

www.psychotherapy.net Three in-depth interviews with master couples therapists John Gottman, Insoo Kim Berg, & Susan Heitler

www.therapyhelp.com Heitler’s TherapyHelp.com

www.danwile.com Dan Wile’s Collaborative Therapy

www.couplesinstitute.com Couples Institute: Bader & Pearson

www.gottman.com Gottman Institute
RELATED VIDEOS AVAILABLE
AT WWW.PSYCHOTHERAPY.NET

*The Angry Couple*
- Susan Heitler, PhD

*Couples and Infertility: Moving Beyond Loss*
- The Ackerman Institute for the Family

*Couple Therapy for Addictions*
- Barbara S. McGrady, PhD

*Gender Differences In Depression: A Marital Therapy Approach*
- The Ackerman Institute for the Family

*Harville Hendrix on The Healing Relationship, with Randall C. Wyatt*
- Harville Hendrix, PhD

*Irreconcilable Differences: A Solution-Focused Approach to Marital Therapy*
- Insoo Kim Berg, MSSW
Psychotherapy.net

Complete Transcript of Couples Therapy: An Introduction

with Ellyn Bader, PhD and Dan Wile, PhD

HOW DOES COUPLES THERAPY HELP?

00:00:20 [Time stamp provided for assistance in locating the interviewer’s questions]

Wyatt: Today, we will be talking to two internationally renowned therapists, Dr. Daniel Wile and Dr. Ellyn Bader.

Dr. Bader is a clinical psychologist. She is co-founder and director of The Couples Institute in Menlo Park, California. She was formerly a clinical faculty member at Stanford University for eight years. She has appeared on The Today Show, CBS Early Morning News, and multiple radio talk shows. She has written two books, both co-authored with her husband, Peter Pearson.

Dr. Wile is also a clinical psychologist. He has a private practice in Oakland, California. He is the author of several important books on couples therapy including After the Honeymoon, How Conflict Can Improve Your Relationship, and After the Fight. He’s also written over a dozen articles on topics on couples therapy and has been a leader in training therapists.

Thank you both for being here.

People often wonder if couples therapy can help them. They may have been struggling for years with problems. They may feel really stuck. How can couples therapy help them?

Bader: Okay, well, first of all, you are right. Couples struggle, and sometimes they struggle way, way, way much more than they would ever need to struggle, because they struggle for years repeating the same destructive, negative cycles or the same patterns. And one of the things that couples therapy is so good for, is stopping those destructive cycles.

And there’s actually two pretty common predictable cycles. One is where
people avoid conflicts with each other. The other is where they get into escalating negative interactions. And one of the things that couples therapy is so good for is being able to stop, stop those patterns and start positive cycles.

Wile: That’s exactly what I would say.

Bader: Oh, great.

Wile: Yeah, that people do suffer from the two things you mentioned, which is withdrawal or getting into fights. And there is a way, right there in the couple therapy situation, that you can take that fight or that withdrawn interaction and turn it into a more collaborative, intimate one, and that’s what they are needing to do in their own lives.

00:02:50

Wyatt: Okay. What kinds of problems do people come in with?

Wile: Well, they come in with all the kinds of things you’d expect. You know, problems with money and with differences about child rearing and sex and all kinds of things like that. But, from my point of view, the big problem is the secondary problem of how they talk about all the other problems, in the way that we were just talking about. So, in dealing with any of these problems, they either get into fights about them, or they sort of give up talking and just kind of withdraw. And so the big, the big problem, everybody’s big problem, is how to talk about these issues that come up in a way that’s collaborative, that works out, that involves some… gets… resurrects some intimacy in their relationship.

Bader: Well, first of all, the most common presenting problem… Almost every couple who walks in the door says, “Our problem is communication.” And in a way, that’s right, and in another way, I don’t think it’s exactly right. In that, what I mean is similar to what Dan was saying, that a big problem is managing our own reactions and our own emotional reactivity when we hear what our partners say or when we hear things we don’t want to hear, when we hear things that are difficult. And so I think that learning how to manage ourselves with our partners is one of the, both, wonderfully growth promoting things about couples therapy. It’s one of the challenges for all of us as human beings, and it’s where a lot of the growth comes from.
Wyatt: What kind of growth do you see in couples therapy? I mean, what kind of changes are possible?

Bader: Enormous changes are possible. I think marriage or committed relationships is where all of us grow up. And one of the ways that I think about it is that we all want a wonderful intimate, perfect relationship, and our culture kind of promotes the idea that that’s possible. And yet, most of us have never been in a non-hierarchical relationship until we choose our partners. We have been in hierarchies in school with teachers and our families with our parents, with our siblings, at work with bosses, and all of a sudden, you are in a relationship with somebody where you are trying to be equal. And it’s a real learning process. It’s not easy. And it’s a learning process for all of us, and to get stuck is normal.

I mean, one of the things that I find a lot is I do a lot of couples workshops, and one of the things that couples say is, “Gosh, I never realized how alike we are” or, “how much we are like these other couples!” And the things that people learn the most is how similar they are, and it’s tremendously reassuring to not feel pathological, to not feel sick when you are stuck, when you are at an impasse. And so I think couples therapy is good at getting people out of those common, predictable impasses. Learning how to be more nurturing at times, be able to respond to our partners more effectively.... Those are a few things.

Wile: One of the immediate things that you see changed is partners who before are kind of, just sort of tight and tense with one another or not talking much or getting into irritable kind of exchanges. Where all of the sudden, there is kind of a warmth between them or a sense of humor comes up or one turns to the other and says, “I am so lucky that someone didn’t grab you away a long time ago.”

Bader: One of the things I often say to couples is that it takes guts and courage to have an intimate relationship, and we don’t normally, again, think of it that way, but I think it takes guts to be intimate, to expose yourself, to reveal yourself, to let the other person know a lot about you. And sometimes it takes courage to hear what the other person is saying, and the intimacy comes in slowing things down enough to be able to really hear what our partners are telling us. Even sometimes the negative things.
Some of the most intimate conversations I have heard couples have are on topics that you would not expect.

I have a classic story that I tell that was of a couple in a workshop where she said to him, “Do you really want to know how I feel?” And he said, “Yes.” And she said, “I pray for your death.”

And believe me, it was like tension, incredible tension in the room. And he was amazing. He learned some of the things we have been teaching, and he said to her, “Now, just how long have you been praying?” And she proceeded to tell him how she had been so afraid and been so conflict-avoidant, she had been afraid to tell him things that were really bothering her. And the only way she imagined getting out of it was if he died. And she opened up and began to tell him a whole lot, and it was…. They had a very, very intimate conversation and felt quite differently at the end of it.

**Wile:** I’ve heard that story from someone that went to your workshop—

**Bader:** I know.

**Wile:** —and it’s an amazing story, and it really captures what we all hope would happen that, in an extreme way, which is that people can say whatever’s on their mind about the other person, and it can be heard. The hurt or the disappointment can be heard beyond the obvious attacking, blaming quality to it. And that is, that’s the big issue. That’s the big… That’s what we are all trying to do.

00:08:44

**Wyatt:** Often times, even though the couple knows they’re in big trouble, that one person may even be then thinking, “This could be the end of this,” one or both parties may be reluctant to come in.

**Bader:** They usually are.

**Wyatt:** Yeah. And why do you think that is? And how can they be helped to overcome that?

**Wile:** Well, sometimes, for good reasons. Like one person, let’s say it’s the man, feels humiliated about coming to see a therapist. It’s just not anything that he has ever been comfortable with, and that’s what he will feel talking to someone. Or maybe it’s somebody who had been in couple therapy before, and it didn’t help or he thought it made it worse or he
thought he was ganged up on by his wife and the therapist. So, people have good reasons to have some reservations about it. Another reason is they could be afraid that if they really talked about the problem, they would discover that they are incompatible and it would end the relationship, and they would rather let the sleeping dogs lie. All these are understandable fears.

Wyatt: So, they are understandable, but might they keep the person even from coming in? I mean, if it does, they won’t be able to get help from you.

Wile: That’s right. So, you are kind of hoping that they’ll sort of give it a try or their partner will talk them into it for a moment. Or they’ll just try it once and that they will get a sense right away in the first session that the fears are not going to be realized, and there is some hopefulness in it.

00:10:22

Wyatt: Do you think that the therapist must be more active in couples therapy?

Bader: Yes.

Wyatt: That’s important?

Bader: Yes. I... Yes. I feel very strongly about that. I don’t think in couples therapy, especially with the tougher problems, that a therapist can be inactive in the initial stages of couples therapy.

Wyatt: They cannot be inactive.

Bader: They have to be active and provide a lot of structure in the early stages. To interrupt. I mean, once you see a fight, you know the pattern, often, of that couple’s fighting. You don’t have to see it a lot of times, and so to have a couple come in and repeat something over and over again that’s destructive isn’t a good use of the time or money.

One of the ways that I think about the role of a couples therapist is that I am both, I’m a coach, I’m a teacher at times, and I’m a travel agent. And by travel agent, I mean that I help the couple take a look at where do they want to go? You know, you don’t go into a travel agent and say, “Send me on a trip.” You say, “I want to go to Alaska.” Well, I want the couple… and I spend time with couples figuring out, what kind of relationship do you
want to have, what do you want it to look like? And so, part of it is setting the trajectory for a positive future.

In a coaching way, I think, I do coach people on their interactions with each other to try things differently and to experiment and be willing to take risks and do things in a different way and see what the outcome is.

I think partners sometimes believe that their partner can’t handle something. I will give you an example in a minute, but… And so, they become this funny kind of protective of each other and so the things don’t get talked about. And so that, as a therapist, part of my role is to help bring those up and help people learn that they can tolerate or deal with way more than they think they can.

WHAT COUPLES WORK ON

00:12:28

**Wyatt:** A big problem people come in with sometimes is that one person says, “I think the problem is them.” The other person thinks the problem is the other person, and the goal of therapy is to fix the other person.

*Now, have you seen this, both, yourself? I’m sure you have. And how do you help people deal with this thing that seemingly can cycle endlessly?*

**Wile:** Well, I… I expect that to happen, because when people are in a fight, that’s what part of being in a fight is. It is, for the moment, really looking at the injury your partner has done to you and underestimating how you’re being provocative. So, I am assuming that.

Now, what I am trying to do is to get behind both persons, to show how both partners’ positions make sense in a way that would get each partner to get some appreciation, that the other person’s position might make more sense than they think.

So, if I get behind each, they enjoy it. And then the other one begins to see, “Well, now, maybe the other partner has more in their position than I was thinking.”

**Bader:** A homework assignment that I like to give sometimes is to… Because I, like Dan, expect that to happen. It’s inevitable but, often, each person is pointing a finger at the other person. So a homework assignment
that I like to give is, “What do you think that you need to do to be a more effective partner?” And I give that to each person to go home and think about, what it is they need to do to be more effective themselves. And then I’ll sometimes follow that up with, not only what do you need to do, but what’s in your way? What’s stopping you from doing that now?

00:14:18

Wyatt: Another thing that couples seem to worry about is when one person seems more committed than the other. They may be more committed to the marriage or the relationship, and they have a strong disagreement about what to do about it. How does couples therapy help them with this issue?

Bader: Well, first of all, one of the things that I think is crucial is if you have one person who is more committed or more motivated, that’s terrific. Because if the person who is committed or motivated, they can be the first one to make some substantial changes. And when they make the changes, then it begins to spiral in a positive way into the relationship.

Sometimes, when a person is more motivated, they drag their feet waiting for the other person to catch up to their level of motivation, and in fact, on different issues, I expect that on different issues, one person will be more motivated than another.

Classic is… very classic is, men are more motivated to talk about the sexual relationship, and women may be much more motivated to talk about household chores and management of the children.

Wile: Whatever the couple is concerned about, and if one is motivated about something and the other one is not motivated about that, that’s fine from my point of view. That becomes the issue in which I want to help them have an elegant conversation. Since what I am looking for is intimacy in whatever they are talking about, there can be very intimate discussions about how one is more committed about something and the other one is not, and then how they work the angles of that and all the struggles about that.
MEN AND WOMEN IN COUPLES THERAPY

00:15:57

**Wyatt:** Do you see any differences between men and women in general? Now, obviously not all men or all women would be that way. But do men and women come in with any different sorts of problems?

**Bader:** I don’t like the sex stereotyping too much because I think… You know, the classic stereotype is women express their feelings more and men are more thinkers, and yet, what I see is men have an enormous range of feelings, and they just don’t express it the same way as women do. And that, in fact, therapy, couples therapy, often helps women understand what their partners feel that they are not able to see, because they don’t express it the same way as their women friends.

**Wile:** Women might, on the average, be quicker to say, “Well, you know, I want to be able to talk more and to talk about feelings” and like, as you are saying, “I can do with my women friends.” So, they are quicker to say that, but if you look beneath the surface, you usually find that the man is wanting intimacy also of a very similar kind of sort. It just comes out a little bit more slowly. And so, I agree that if you really look at it, then men and women are very similar.

**Wyatt:** So, the way that men or women may characteristically express themselves may be different, but you’ve found that they still come in with similar issues?

**Bader:** And have similar feelings about a whole range of things.

00:17:26

**Wyatt:** Sometimes, in a committed long-term relationship, it is not uncommon for intimacy or sexuality to break down. Is this something that’s important for the couple to bring up in therapy, and how do you deal with that?

**Wile:** The special advantage of couple therapy for that, is that when things begin to go wrong, usually the partners don’t talk about it. It’s one of those things that’s kind of hard to bring up. They only bring it up in the off hand kind of way; they don’t get too far into it. So that the… And, you know, what happens is, someone begins to lose a little bit of
interest or the man feels rejected when he makes overtures and then pretty soon he stops making them, and sex could just become very infrequent. That’s a very common problem. And they don’t really talk that much about it. And both are feeling kind of hurt in their own way.

So, couple therapy is just a great situation where you have this third person who is just asking some straightforward, direct questions that are hard for the couple themselves to bring up, to just talk directly about it. And sometimes that can help a lot, very quickly.

**Bader:** I think couples therapy is a great place, also, to deal with sexual issues. And probably the two most common sexual problems… And often, I mean, for… couples stop having sex. Many couples stop having sex sort of three to four years into the relationship. And I think it is often because there are different desire levels, and it’s not so much that there is a different desire level but then the misinterpretations that happen around it. So, one partner doesn’t want sex very often, and the other person experiences that very personally. It’s a personal hurt; it’s a personal rejection. And just being able to understand the difference in desire levels and where that comes from, already begins to make a shift.

Another classic problem is, let’s say, and I’ll use the sex roles again here, but let’s say a woman wants to tell a man how she wants to be touched and where she wants to be touched. And he feels like she’s controlling him, and so he may say, “I don’t want to hear about it” or “I don’t want to be controlled that way.” And when you can slow the conversation down, help them understand that it’s not control but it is, in fact, a path, a way to greater intimacy to understand what it is that really is a turn on. What turns her on, what she wants. That, in fact, she wants to be more passionate with him rather than to be more shut down or withdrawn from him.

**GETTING THE MOST OUT OF COUPLES THERAPY**

00:20:19

**Wyatt:** In your experience what can a couple do to get the most benefit from being in couples therapy?

**Bader:** Well that’s a topic I love to talk about, because I absolutely think that the way couples get the most out of therapy is if they’re willing to stay...
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conscious about their own goals. And so that when they go home, if there is a homework assignment that the therapist has given, that they do the homework. That when they come in to a session, they will start the session, they will initiate the session by saying, “What I want to look at today is... the way I blew up and why I blew up at her or him the way that I blew up. And I know that the kind of partner I want to be is one who is supportive and not one who is angry and demeaning.” And those kinds of initiations of goals or content for a session help the therapy move more quickly.

Wile: And one thing is that, is that it’s important or useful to have couples, partners, clients feel comfortable to doing, to say things about how they’re feeling about what’s going on in the therapy. Like, if they are feeling that it’s not really touching on what they want to touch on, or if they feel that the therapist seems to be siding more with one partner or the other, the more they’re able to bring that up, the better the therapy goes.

Bader: And one of things... one of the reasons that I agreed to do this interview was because I think that the more educated any couple is by the therapist about how to get the most out of therapy then they can play a very active role in making the therapy productive, and it’s not completely on the therapist. It’s a very interactive process. But it takes some education. It takes people understanding what they can contribute that will actually help it go better.

00:22:15

Wyatt: A moment ago, Dr. Bader, you said something about how a partner will assume the other person can’t handle or deal with something they are about to say. Can you say more about how that works?

Bader: Yeah, I could say a lot. It’s actually why I wrote the book, Tell Me No Lies. But I’ll try to summarize the whole book in, like, a really short piece. Which is, I think that in...

Everybody that you meet on the street would say, or almost everybody would say, “I want an intimate relationship, I want a close loving relationship.” And yet, we either train our partners not to be intimate with us by when they tell us something we don’t want to hear, we collapse into tears, we blow up, we yell at them and kind of give out the message, “I can’t handle that. Don’t tell me.” And so then the next time, partner doesn’t tell
A simple classic example is, let’s say you have a couple, and she goes out for
the evening. He’s home with the four-year old, who he’s supposed to put to
bed. And of course he doesn’t get her to bed on time. He may not even give
her the bath. Wife comes home, and she says, “So, did you get Suzy to bed
on time?” And if he says “no,” she’ll say, “Well, this is awful. You know,
you said you would do it. I can’t count on you. I can’t rely on you.” And
so, he feels like, “So, why did I bother telling her the truth?” And the next
time, what happens is he’ll say, “Oh, yeah. I got her to bed on time.” Even
though he probably didn’t or, “Yeah, she got a bath” when she really didn’t.

That’s the simple, kind of innocuous process, but it goes on all the time.
And as it goes on more and more, we begin to learn or believe or create
an illusion in our minds that our partners can’t handle us being really
forthright with them and telling them the truth.

Like, “No, I actually had much more fun playing with her, and I decided
not to give her a bath.” That would be the more forthright thing to say. So,
part of what I think couples therapy is about is learning that it’s really okay
to be forthright and say those things and tolerate then the discussion that
might come, might follow from it.

**Wile:** That’s really nice. The way I think about that is the partners are
really sensitive to one another. They, you know, here’s this person who’s
most important to you in your whole life except for your kids who are
important in another way. And you really are affected by how they are
thinking and feeling about you moment to moment, so you really take…
react strongly when that person gets angry at you. And you can find
yourself fudging a little bit. And you can find yourself not saying things.

So, there’s this kind of intermixture between times when there is some
sharp words said and then even longer times when things aren’t quite
being said. And not just fudging the truth, but just keeping it to yourself.
And that’s the cycle that everybody is in that couple therapy is trying to
help people out of, by providing a situation where you can say some of
these things that you didn’t say before as well as where you can say why
you didn’t say them.
Wyatt: It sounds like people are afraid, rightly so, when they come into couples therapy that all these things will come out. But often times, are you guys saying that you learn more about peoples’ strengths and their good qualities that come out, not only learn but get reignited from early on in their relationship?

Bader: I think good couples therapy helps bring out the best in each person. And even sometimes is a voice for helping a partner recognize what they’re not seeing. So, there’ll be times when I might say to a man or woman, “I think what your partner is really telling you is…” whatever. You know, some… “I think what they are really telling you is that you really mean a lot to them, and because you mean so much to them they are afraid to tell you this.”

Wile: People are really grateful, often, when you say that for them. They say, “Yeah, that’s what I wanted to say.”

Bader: Right.

Wile: “But it didn’t come out right.”

Wyatt: How does the couple know if this couples therapist is right for them? If it’s a good fit or a bad fit?

Bader: A big warning sign is if you are going home, session after session, feeling worse than when you came in, that’s a big red flag. I think that very early on, partners in couples therapy either have a sense that the therapist does understand what they’re talking about and is actively intervening enough, or they go away with the feeling of “we’re not getting anywhere.”

I mean, the classic thing I hear from couples who had bad couples therapy experiences is, “We just came in and talked about the same things over and over again. We didn’t have any different idea about what to do when we went home, and it just seemed like we never were getting any place.”

Wyatt: Are there times when you see members of the couple individually? And when might that be?
Wile: Therapists differ a lot on this. Some therapists always make sure to do that. My inclination is, I don’t think of doing that unless it occurs to one of them that it might be a good idea. If it occurs to one of them that it might be a good idea, they really have something in mind, you might want to find out about it, and maybe do it then.

Wyatt: Okay.

Bader: I am probably on the loose end on this one in that I like to see people, sometimes, separately particularly given the kinds of travel and work schedules that people have now where a lot of times one partner is out of town. And so, I will sometimes see a partner without the other person.

One of the things that I do when I do that is, first of all, to make sure that it’s okay with both people. And then after that’s clear, to let the person know that either one of us can feedback what went on in that session.

00:28:53

Wyatt: That brings up the question of secrets. If you meet with a person individually and secrets were revealed, do you keep it private? How does confidentiality work in these situations?

Wile: Yeah, well, that is a big, big problem. And I’ve done different things at different times. So, one thing I’ve done is when they are, both are in the session and they are talking about seeing me, each for an individual session, to ask them, “Well, what do we do about confidentiality?” And I even mention the big one. “Suppose someone says something like, say, they’re having an affair. What am I supposed to do with that information?” So, we have a clear understanding right away whether that’s to be kept secret or whether that’s not to be kept secret.

Bader: I don’t have one policy for every single couple or every case but so, it’s very case specific and hard to give a short answer on.

I often do it the way Dan did. There are some couples, I wouldn’t see them separately. With most couples, I really want to know if there is a secret, so I tell people early on at the beginning that I am going be the most helpful to them if they are willing to be straight with me and give me the information, and I really do know what’s going on.
Wile: And as you can see, different therapists have different views about secrets and confidentiality. So, it’s probably best for a couple to talk to their therapist about what his or her views about the matter are.

**DOES COUPLES THERAPY WORK?**

00:30:23

**Wyatt:** People often ask, you know, “Can therapy help us?” Does therapy help people? I mean, what kind of help can people expect from it? And, I don’t know if you have an exact percentage, probably not, but how many people do get better when they come in for couples counseling?

**Bader:** Well, first of all, you have to know what better means to answer that, really, because there are times when people come in to separate and they may not say that to you in the first session or two. But that’s really what they want, is to separate. So, a successful separation where they ended and they do it without hurting each other could be a success. But... so, it’s very hard to put percentages on it. I would say an enormous number of the people who come to see me, get a lot out of it. Most of them reach their goals. Some of them do decide to split up. And sometimes they are both happy about it, and sometimes they are not.

**Wile:** Well, I don’t know the exact figures. I mean, some people get a lot out of it. Some people get nothing at all out of it. There’s a whole bunch of people that get sort of something about... out of it. What I’m looking, all the time, is to take whatever they are struggling with and try to just get the most elegant conversations I can with them, so that if they do decide to part, while they do so, they have a better divorce than they had a marriage.

**Wyatt:** I’ve even seen it when the couple that comes in wanting to separate and divorce, and they do so well in the therapy, plotting out their divorce, they decide, “We still are in love with each other, and we want to get back together.” Have either one of you seen that, where people come in just thinking it will never work, and it works?

**Bader:** Yeah. And in fact, my husband and I do a couples workshop together, and one of the things that’s happened with that workshop, is we’ve had some people come who are right on the edge of divorce or who have come in for the purpose of being able to have a better divorce, and
one of the things that we talk a lot about in the workshop is the normal developmental stages the relationships go through, and they began to identify themselves as being somewhere in those stages and recognize that it really is a premature divorce. And I think there are a lot of premature divorces. I think our culture really promotes the “instant fix,” that you should always be feeling good. We don’t have a lot of support in our culture for struggling through some of the tougher times and coming out on the other side of it.

00:33:05

**Wyatt:** What do you say to couples when they come in and ask, “How long will therapy take”?

**Bader:** I say that the length is often dependent on both the strength and the urgency of their own motivation. That, you know, that the more strongly motivated they are and the more urgent they feel for things to get done, the faster they are going to get done.

**Wyatt:** What if one person says, “Well, I think we can do that in two sessions;” the other person says, “I think we need years”?

**Bader:** What I would say is, “You might both be right. So, you might do… You might surprise me. You might do an incredible amount in two sessions.” In fact, the one who says two sessions, I say, “You may do all kinds of thing between now and the next session that are going to surprise the heck out of him or her.”

You know, what I am pulling for and trying to capitalize on a little bit is, “If you don’t want to be here a long time, then get moving.”

**Wile:** I answer kind of straightforwardly. I say, “Well, a lot of people come couple of months. That’s the… Some people come one or two sessions. And sometimes people, a few people come years.” And it’s… The idea that I’m trying to get across is that it’s all up to them and what they’re wanting. And they’re the ones that are going to be making the decision.

**Bader:** I think that there are a couple of concepts that when couples get them, make an enormous difference about what they can do on their own outside of couples therapy. One is the concept that I teach them, “being curious instead of furious,” that when you can, in those moments when
you want to clobber your partner and you think they have done something outrageous, if you can turn that into curiosity about, “Can you tell me what was going on? Can you tell me how come you just did that?” Can you really ask and enquire in a sincere way about something your partner did, rather than attacking them or sitting with your fury and doing nothing about it? So, that when couples do that, when they get that and they start to do that, they can do a lot without a therapist.

One of the fights my husband and I used to have in a really repetitive way was about household chores, which is a common one, too, for couples. But he would say, he has a much higher tolerance for visual disarray than I do. In other words, he is much more of slob than I am. But he...

So, we used to fight about that, and, you know, I’d come home and the dishes wouldn’t be put away out of the dishwasher and he said he was going to clean up and the counters were still scattered with things. And I’d walk in the door, and I’d start going, “Now, why didn’t you do X? Why didn’t you do those things?” And then, he’d feel like responding in a very rebellious, nasty way to me, and so we could get into a pretty bad cycle. And when I was able to start asking him, “How do you want me to respond?” The curiosity. “How do you want me to respond? What is it you would like me to do when I come home and you have said that you would do X or Y and you didn’t do it?”

And one of the things I had to learn about him, which is very different than how I am, is that...lots of positive strokes. Lots of positive recognition, even for things that I thought were small, were building in the direction that I wanted to go. And so I had to stretch myself to, even when the job wasn’t completed, to be able to say, “Hey, terrific. Thank you. The dishes were put away, and it’s great when I come home and I see that I don’t have to empty the dishwasher.” And there might still be, you know, the table not washed off and the counters not clean. And so, it’s all successive approximation of positive regard, but I had to learn what those positive strokes meant to him, instead of just clobbering him.
SECOND CHANCES

00:37:00

**Wyatt:** It’s clear from talking to you both that you enjoy doing couples therapy. What do you most enjoy about working with couples?

**Wile:** Well, it’s taking someone who’s come into the office, and they’re kind of demoralized, and they’re kind of looking down at the ground. Or they’ve got this angry look in their eye, and they’ve had a battle, and take that and turn it into an intimate conversation.

**Bader:** I find it inspirational, for one thing. It just, I mean, there are sessions where I feel privileged to be a part of whatever that couple is talking about or the changes that they’re making. I like it because I think it’s faster than individual therapy, in general. You don’t have to wait for things to develop between you and the client. It’s already very developed in the partnership. And I get to see it, and I also get to witness the changes that people make. So, I get to see them when they’re in that worst, most awful place, and I really get to see the transition and the transformation and the change to the good place.

**Wile:** Yeah, I sure feel that, too. Like, there’s many times in sessions when the partners get in touch with something and something very intimate happens that has a lovely poetic quality that really draws me in, and I find myself tearing up some. That’s a regular occurrence.

00:38:20

**Wyatt:** What about this video… in participating and talking to couples who are either considering couples therapy or already in it, moved you to be in this, in this video?

**Bader:** A few things. For me, one was what I said to you before that I think there are premature divorces, and I would love to see more people give themselves a chance in couples therapy before they just escalate into a divorce. Because I think that the homework, or if people get educated about what couples therapy is about, I hope they will come to it with a different feeling about it.

**Wile:** Well, what I would hope, is that people would feel empowered that a lot of the responsibility is the therapist to see where they are, rather than
that they have to do things. That they can participate in the decisions about what the therapy is and how it goes, that they can bring up if they feel the therapist is taking sides that there’s…. Versus a view that, maybe it’s less common now that, you know, this is the expert who knows things, and you should just go along with it. I wanted to counter that view.

**Bader:** Yeah, one other thing. I think relationship is so core to how people feel about themselves, I think. I mean, I think it’s very core to our own self-esteem if we feel like we’re succeeding in a relationship or having a meaningful relationship. And I just think couples therapists have a tremendous amount to offer people in terms of not only their sense of their own capacity to be successful in their relationships but that that spills over once a person has that and they have internalized that they feel good about themselves in that way, it spills over into how they are in other relationships. It spills over into how they are at work. So, it’s not… You know, it has a very positive ripple effect.

00:40:23

**Wyatt:** Is there other things, questions, that we didn’t ask you today that have come up with couples before?

**Bader:** One. One line I was thinking of that I sometimes say to couples that might be a nice place for me to end or think about is that if you can change what you do or what you say when your partner is being a jerk, because it is inevitable that our partners will sometimes be a jerk. So, if you can respond… If you can change what you do or what you say in those moments, you’ll change yourself and you’ll change your life.

**Wile:** Let me add on to that, which is… And when you fail and when you…at any given moment, you respond to your partner’s being a jerk by being a jerk yourself, you have a second chance because you can come back 10 minutes later or an hour later, a day later and confess having been a jerk, and start a more collaborative discussion about the arguments you had. There’s always second chances.

**Wyatt:** I really appreciate having you both. Thank you very much.

**Bader:** Thank you.

**Wile:** It was a pleasure.
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