

Motivational Interviewing with Couples: Helping people in relationships change together

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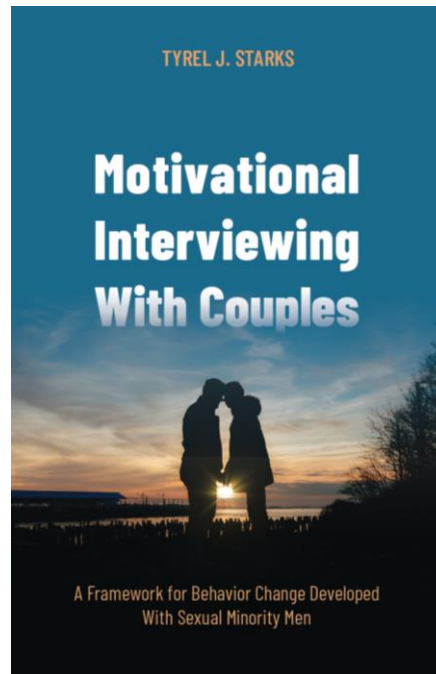


Dr. Starks obtained his PhD in Clinical Psychology (specializing in work with children and adolescents) from Southern Illinois University Carbondale in 2009. Currently, he is a Professor of Psychology at Hunter College of the City University of New York; a New York State licensed clinical psychologist; and certified trainer and member of the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT). For more than a decade, Dr. Starks has conducted research funded by the National Institutes of Health focused on sexual-romantic relationships and health, with a particular emphasis on the development of substance use and sexual health interventions for couples. This work is ongoing and includes the 2022 publication of his book, *Motivational Interviewing with Couples*, by Oxford University Press.

Disclosures/Conflicts of Interest

Dr. Starks receives royalties from the sale of *Motivational Interviewing with Couples* through Oxford University Press.

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Learning Objectives

1. Discuss how relationship partners and relationships in general influence individual behavior.
2. Describe the difference between speaking to an individual versus a couple.
3. Explain how change planning with couples integrates partner engagement.

Today's topics

- Why we needed MI with couples
- Expressing MI spirit with couples
- Speaking to the couple
- Supporting relationship quality
 - Catalyzing adaptive communication
 - Drawing out relationship strengths
- Change planning with couples

This is just a taste!

Lots of other interesting and important topics are out there!

The Rationale for MI with Couples

The challenges that required a different approach to MI for those in relationships

Terminology check-in

- Lots of “dyads” exist
 - Parent-child
 - Employer-employee
 - Close friendships
 - Siblings
- Our focus is on “relationship dyads”
 - Partners
 - Spouses
 - Boyfriend/girlfriend/lover

Entirely possible that Motivational Interviewing with Couples is relevant in some way to these kinds of dyads. But that is an interesting conversation for another time.

Formally, we have focused on “close personal relationships that are also sexual in nature.”

Challenge #1: The identified client model left too many people behind

- Many couples substance use treatments assume one partner uses and the other does not.
- But what if similarity is the norm?
 - Research on sexual and gender minority couples' substance use patterns suggest as many as two-thirds of couples comprise partners who both use drugs (Hillesheim & Starks, 2024; Starks et al, 2021)
- To maximize reach, we needed a way to engage couples where **1 or both** partners engage in the behavior of interest

Challenge #2: Couples are not just groups of 2

- Their relationship extends beyond the counseling session
- Partners depend and rely on one another
 - Shared resources
 - Emotional support
- Partners have a wide range of ways to influence one another
 - Social control strategies range from passive to active and aversive to supportive
 - They can support or hinder goal attainment

Working together works better...

- When partners find a shared goal
 - They coordinate effort
 - They support one another
- That might require
 - Negotiation
 - Sacrifice
- Relationship quality shapes negotiations
 - Higher quality = More motivation to compromise and more to lose in conflict
 - Lower quality = Less to lose in conflict and more motivation to fight for your personal preferences whatever the cost



(Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003)

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Challenge #3: Dyadic ambivalence: When partners want different things

- Initial attempts at MI with couples got a little stuck
 - Sometimes it worked; other times not
- It was not clear what to do when partners felt differently about change or how to go about it.



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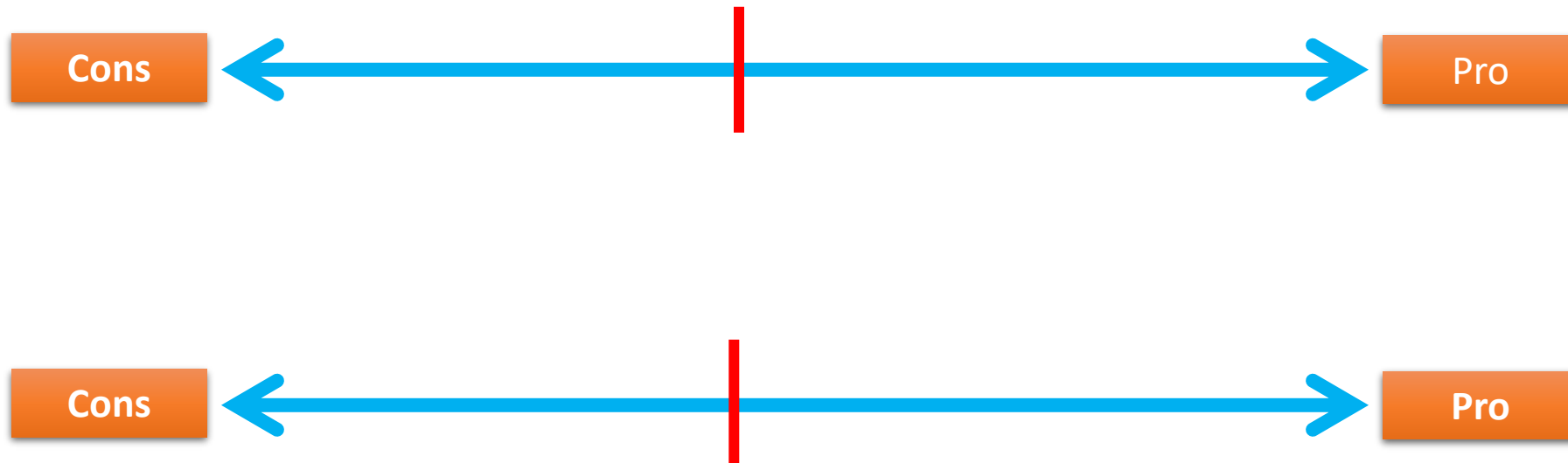
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Evoking change talk is reasonably straightforward

- When both partners feel the same way about change
 - They will react in similar ways to our utterances
 - Tried and true MI techniques will work the way you expect them to



When evoking is more challenging

- When partners feel differently (**dyadic ambivalence**)
 - Statements that elicit change talk from one partner will likely elicit sustain talk from the other
 - Tried and true MI techniques will very likely fail



Our answer: Think of the couple as the client

- You would not push an ambivalent **person** to plan before the ambivalence resolved
- Expecting an ambivalent **couple** to collaborate on a change plan is comparably tough until they find consensus



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Our answer: Think of the couple as the client

- If helping couples find a shared goal matters then so does
 - Supporting productive communication
 - Affirming relationship quality
- Collaboration should be carried through into change planning



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Building on the MI legacy

What should be familiar

- MI Spirit is still MI Spirit
- The 4 basic processes remain relevant – Engaging, Focusing, Evoking, and Planning
- OARS are still OARS
- Change talk is still change talk

And what will likely be new

- Skills for speaking “to the couple”
- Facilitating dyadic functioning is a new process
 - Strengths-based communication skill building
 - Recognizing and emphasizing relationship quality
- Conflict mitigation
- Collaborative change planning

What MI with Couples has to offer

- A roadmap to extend your existing MI practice to include relationship partners
 - Building on skills you may already have from work with individuals and groups
 - Adding skills unique to working with couples
- A way to engage relationship partners in the ongoing treatment of your individual clients
- A way to engage couples when partners present together at the outset of treatment

The Spirit of MI with Couples

Comparing two ways of being with a couple

5 Question Exercise

ROUND 1:

- Demetria, you took the lead scheduling this session. Why was it important to you that you two come in?
- What is most important to you about this relationship?
- Demetria, given that you set this up, what do you think needs to change in this relationship?
- If you guys were to make this change, what benefit do you think that would have for you two?
- What could Joseph do to help facilitate this change?

Counselor



Demetria

Joseph

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Round 1

Nice to meet the two of you.

Demetria, you took the lead in setting up these sessions. One place we could start is with you telling us why it was important to you to arrange for the two of you to come in.

Well, things at home have been a little stressful the last six months. We moved in together and we are kind of trying get used to that. It's been a longer and a more difficult transition than I think we were anticipating. So I thought that maybe we could talking to somebody would help us. At least give us some direction to go in.



Round 1

Got it.

You have some concerns.
You are looking for
someone to help with
that.

What's most important to
you about this
relationship?

I get a lot of emotional support from Joseph. And just
to have somebody there who's concerned about my
well-being, and me, and making sure I'm ok. It's
good. He's really good in that way.



Round 1

Got it.

So, given that you were the one to sort of set this up Demetria. I'm wondering, what do you think needs to change in this relationship?

What's your hunch?

I think, having him be just a little more patient with me. My job is stressful and when I get home, I just want to go sit on the couch. I'm a teacher so it's like a lot of kids, a lot of energy. I'm just exhausted.

I know like he gets mad at me because I'm not helping out with the dishes or I'm not helping out with this or that. I just want him to understand that I need that time at the end of the day to pause, and relax, maybe have a drink. And then I can engage again.



Round 1

So, in a way, you'd like for Joseph to have just a little more perspective about what's going on for you in some of those moments where the two of you are sort of frustrated with one another.

Yeah



Round 1

If you guys were to make that sort of change, how do you think that might benefit the two of you?

What would be good about that?

I think that it would just like create more peace. I don't know. That there would be less, sort of like, we'd be less activated at the end of the day if we could kind of communicate better.

Yeah. I think that would probably be helpful.



Round 1

So, just to wrap up your perspective Demetria, what could Joseph potentially do to help facilitate that kind of change for the two of you?

Just to, just to like, give me a little bit of space when I get home. And it doesn't have to be for the whole night. Just like an hour where, it's like, I just need to veg and be in my own head and just like relax. Let me have a drink, take a nap, sort of reset from the day.

Something like that and just like we can talk about things. We can do all that stuff, but I just need like when I get home just to be like be left alone for like a good hour.



Consider for a moment



Please type your answers in the chat window.

- Who is the counselor speaking to most of the time?
- Whose perspective is influencing the session most?
- How well is the counselor expressing MI spirit?
 - Towards Demetria?
 - Towards Joseph?

5 Question Exercise

ROUND 2:

- What brings you two in?
- What is most important to you about this relationship?
- What, if anything, do you wish was different about this relationship?
- If you were to make a change, what benefit do you think that would have for the two of you?
- How would you two go about making a change, if you decided to?

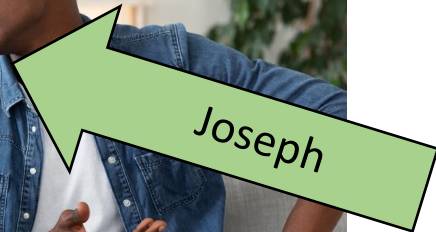
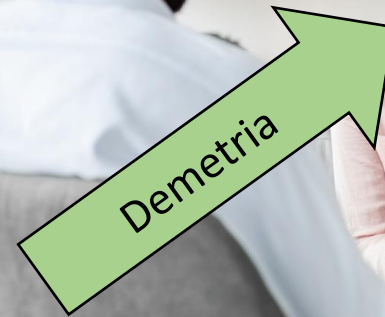
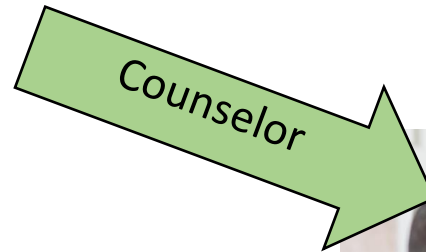


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Round 2

What brings you two in to see me?

Well, I guess we've had some big changes in the past six months or so. And I think we are both just feeling a little bit frustrated and a little bit like things aren't working white like we want them to.

Yeah, yeah it's been a little tense around our house recently.



Round 2

Got it. So, what's most important to you both about this relationship?

Well, it's just, to have that love and support and to have somebody there for me who's always concerned about my well-being and making sure that I'm good. Just to have that support has been really nice.

Yeah. I feel the same way. I think it's the supportiveness. It's like, I feel like we share a lot of the same values. Everything just, up until the past few months has felt like very easy.



Round 2

Well, our lives are stressful. And now that we are living together, it's like we're in the stress together more. And so it's been manifesting in the things that happen in the apartment. Things aren't getting done when we would like them to— like dishes and cleaning and tidying up. And we are just, frustrated. Sometimes it's just easier to have a drink together and relax for awhile. But then we get further behind.

So things were for a long time really good. And things have gotten a little bit harder lately.

So, what, if anything, do you wish was different in this relationship?



I agree. It's like now that we are in the same space there is just a different type of stress that we have to cope with.

There are things we didn't have to deal with before like the dishes or responsibilities around the house that now suddenly are like part of the relationship.

Round 2

So suddenly the daily hassles are a bigger deal between the two of you.

If you were to change something, whatever that might be, if you were to change something, what do you think the benefit of that would be for the two of you?

I think it would just help us if we could figure out sort of how to deal with what we were just talking about – this sort of like sharing more responsibilities dealing with the daily stress and stuff – create a calmer environment where we are not sort of activated when we get home at the end of the day.



And just to be patient more with each other.

Round 2

We'd all like to have a little more peace in the space we live in.

So how might the two of you go about making that kind of change together?

Well I think this is part of it. I think we are a little bit unsure about exactly what needs to do, or at least I feel unsure. Probably thinking about how we communicate with each other would be a big piece of it.



Yeah I think we don't talk about the things that are bothering us in the moment until they become like a bigger deal. And then it's like explosion.

Consider for a moment



- What changed?
- What did the counselor do differently?
- What was different about the couples' behavior?

Compare and Contrast

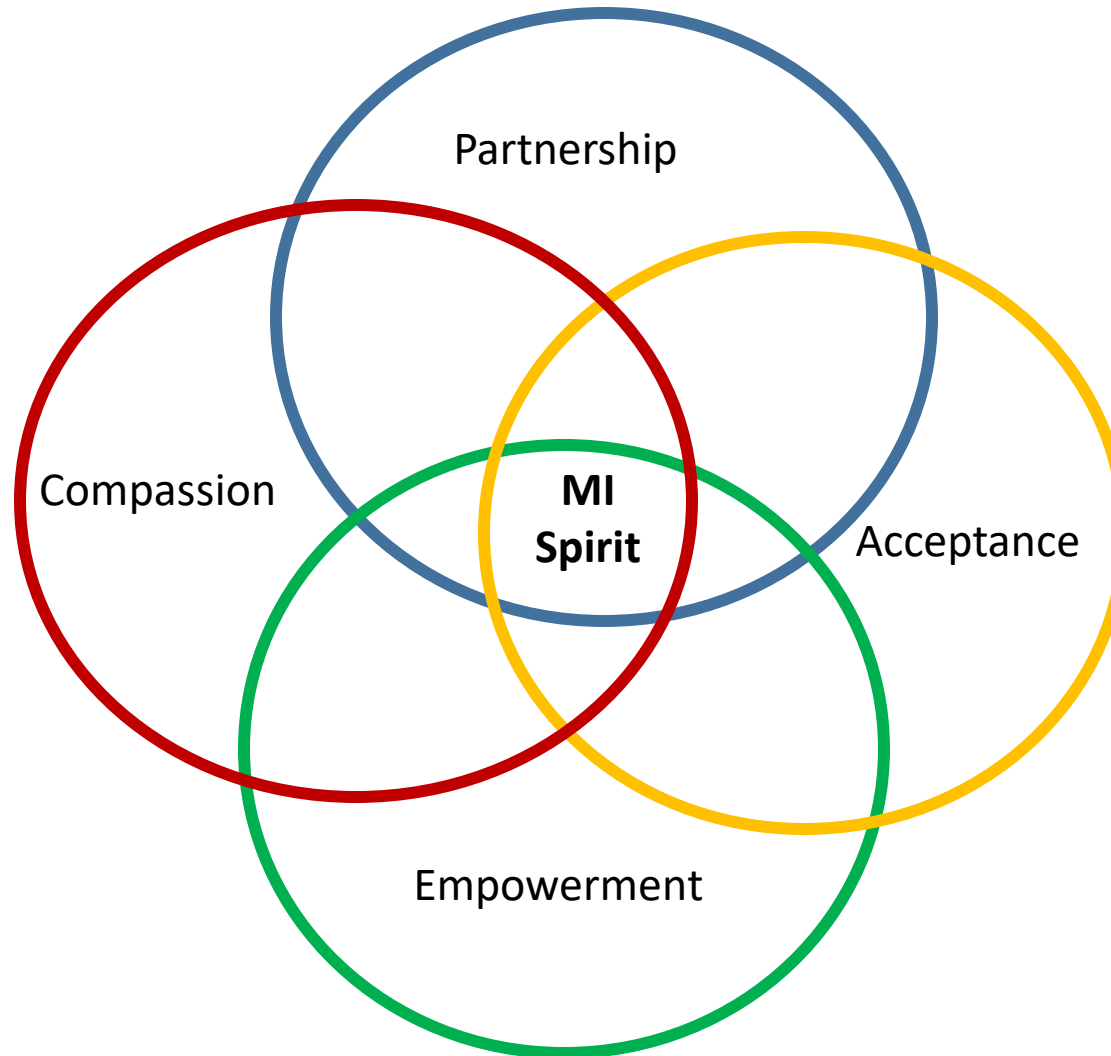
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MI Spirit



MI Spirit and Couples: A dialectic of focus



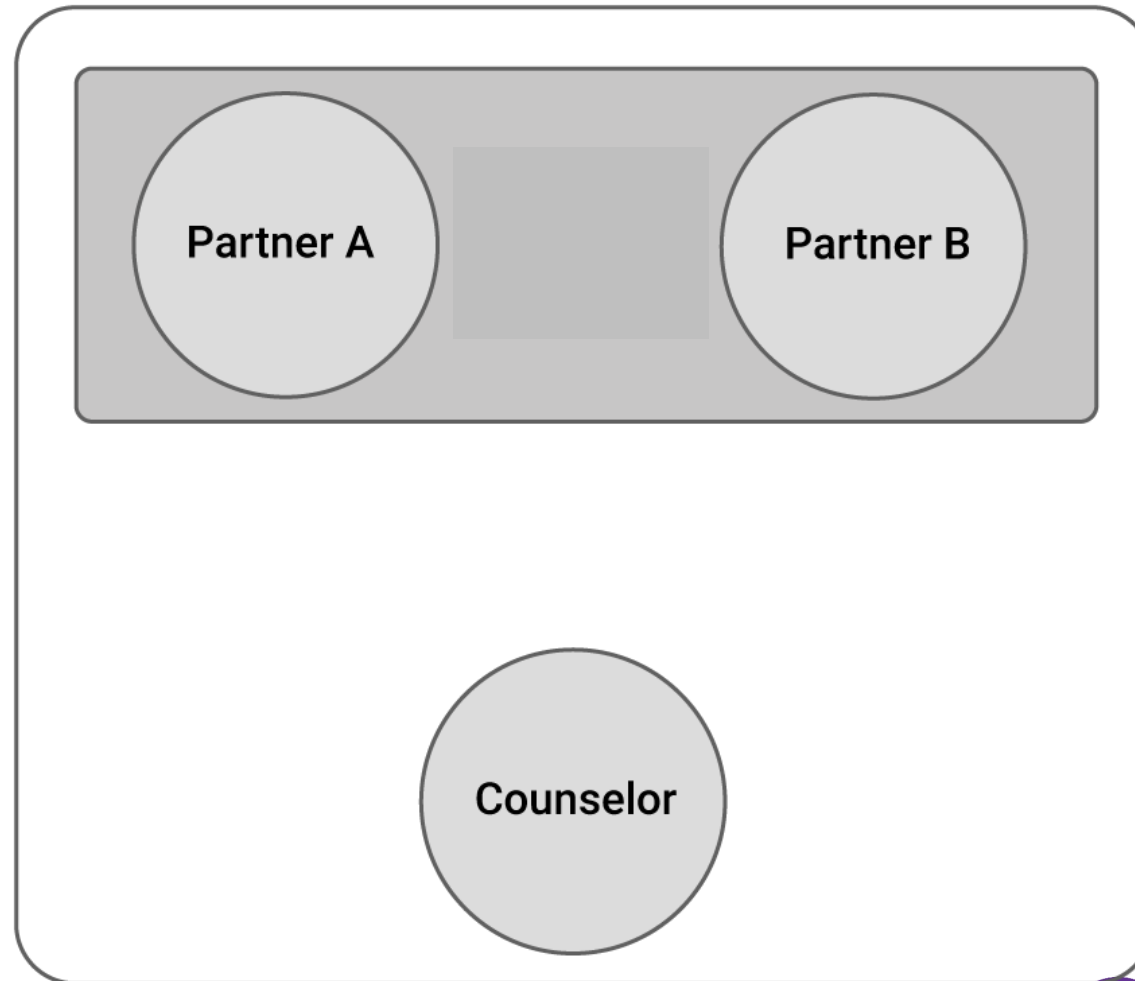
MI Spirit and Couples: A dialectic of focus



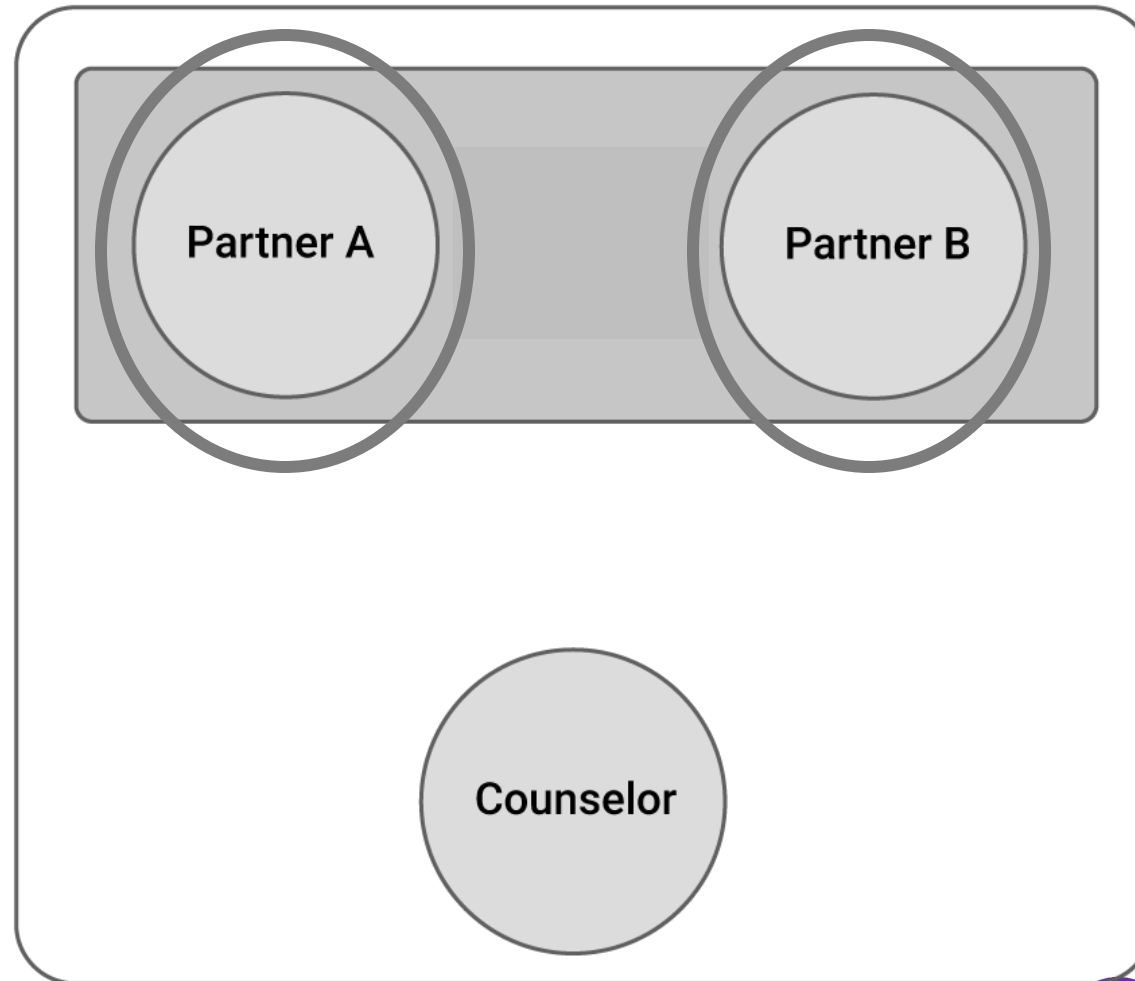
Talking with a Couple

Pathways of communication in session

Pathways of communication

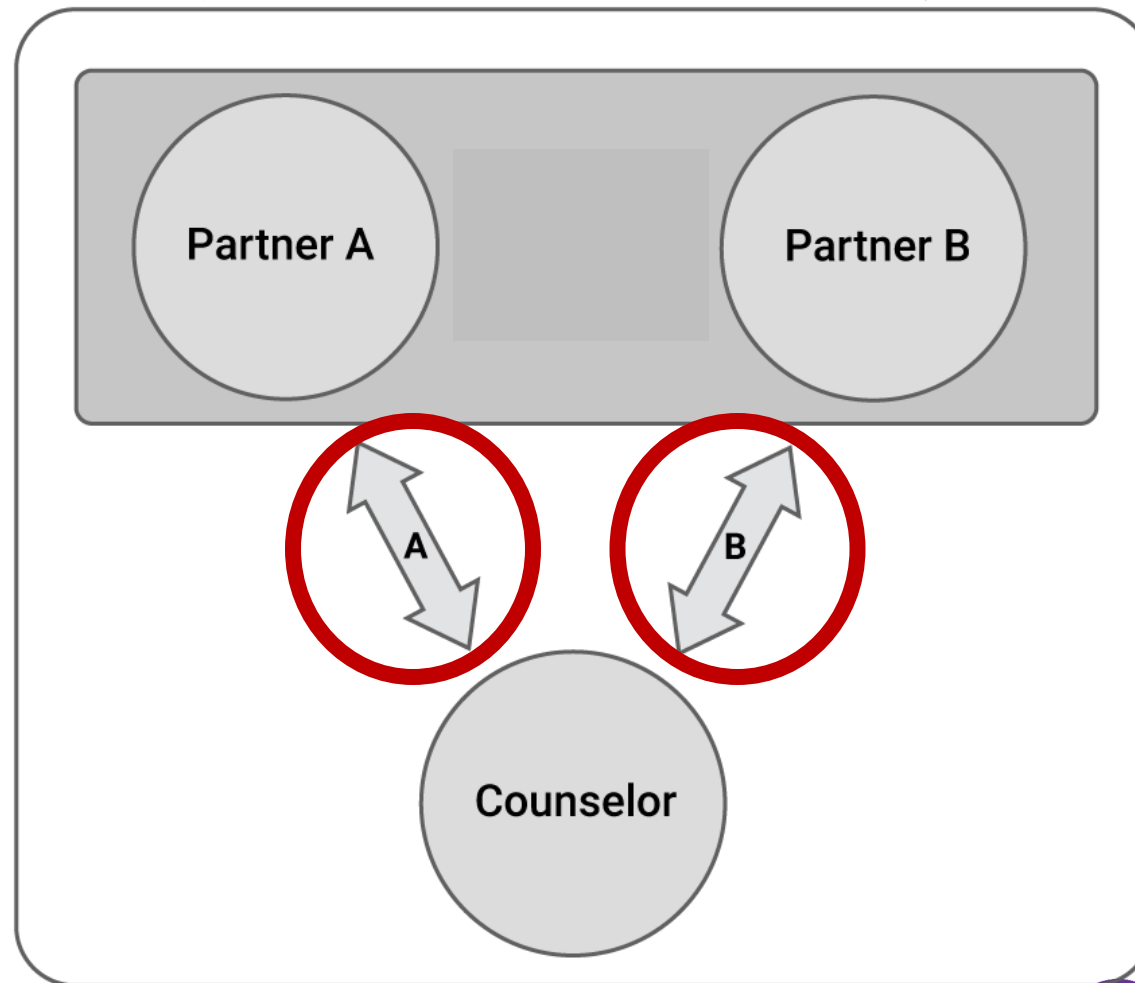


Pathways of communication

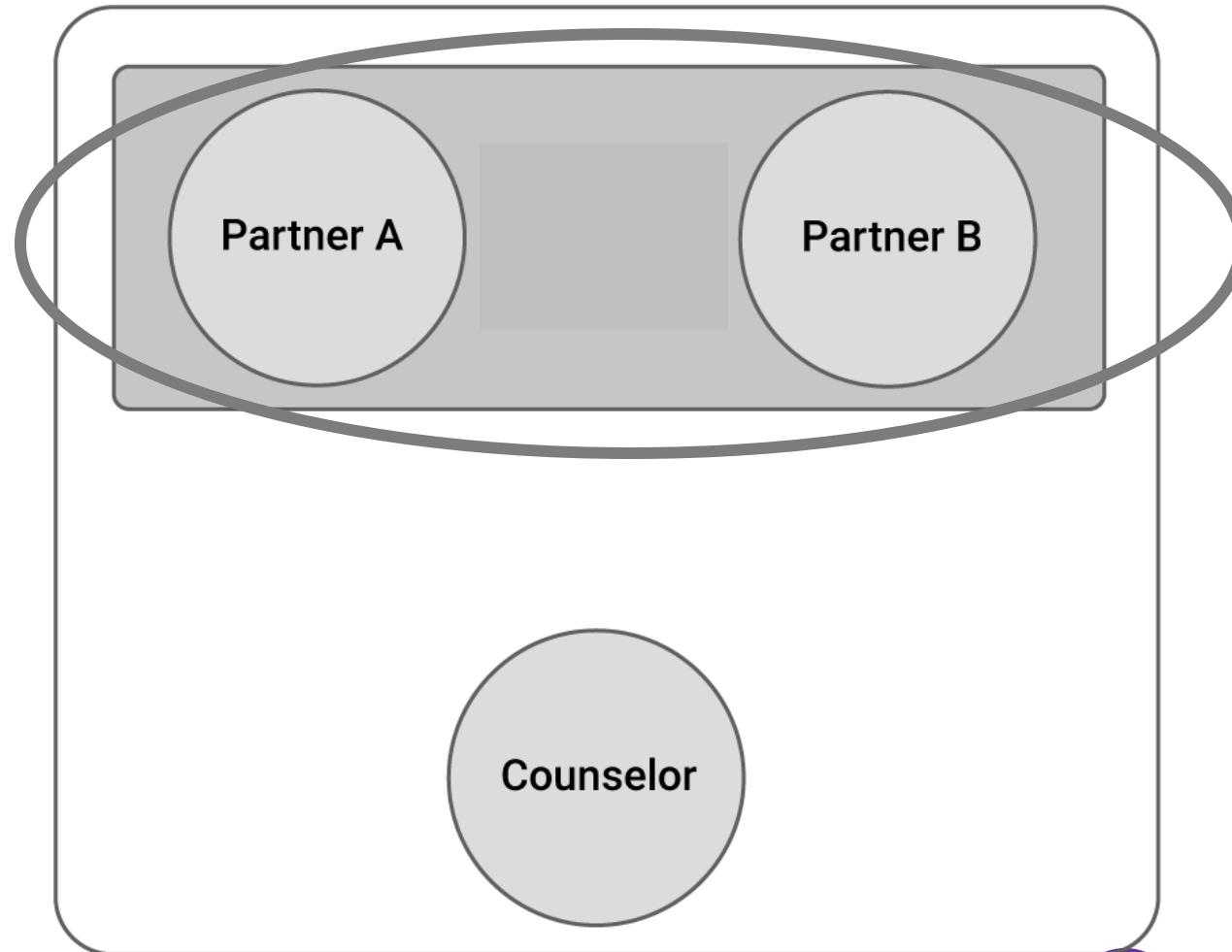


Both of them

Each of them



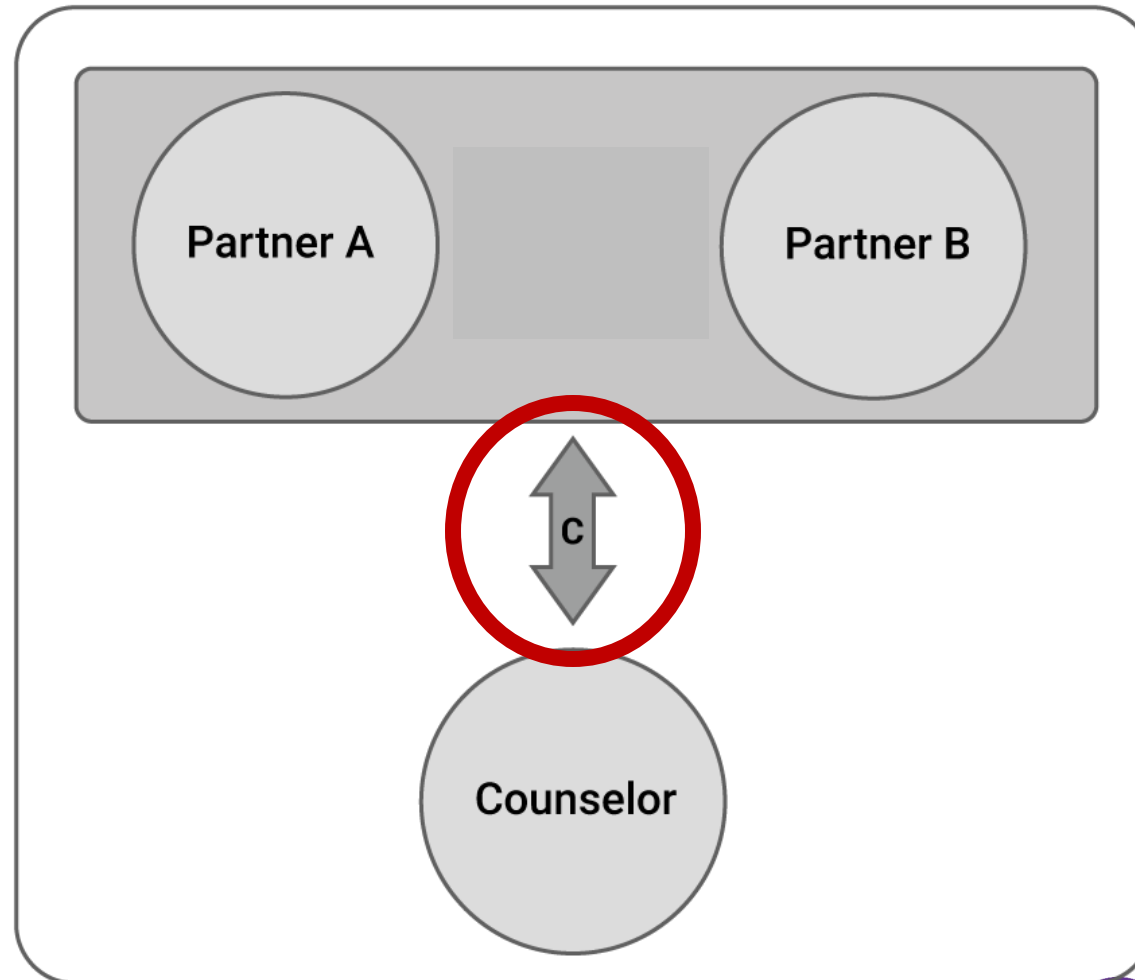
Pathways of communication



Both of them



Each of them



Talking to “both of them”

- Dyadic questions
 - Directed to the couple (worded in the plural)
 - Allow the couple to decide how to organize their response
- Dyadic reflections
 - Contain content provided by both partners
 - They express what the partners together are saying to you
- Relationship affirmations
 - Verbalize the couple’s strengths
 - Reinforce indicators of (high) relationship quality

Try it out!

- **Partner 1:** I don't see a problem with him drinking if we go out.
- **Partner 2:** If he doesn't see a problem, why should I?
- **POSSIBLE RESPONSES:**
 - Dyadic reflection_____
 - To Partner 1_____ (Question or Reflection)
 - To Partner 2_____ (Question or Reflection)

Try it out!

- **Partner 1:** I do not see a problem with him drinking when we go out.
- **Partner 2:** If he doesn't see a problem, why should I?

- POSSIBLE RESP

2:00

- Dyadic reflection

- To Partner 1 _____ (Question or Reflection)

- To Partner 2 _____ (Question or Reflection)

2 minutes on the
clock!

A twist: Couples have a way of speaking

- 3 styles have been observed
 - Co-speaking
 - Parallel speaking
 - Spokeperson
- Each styles “pulls” for a response from the counselor
 - Finding balance means attending to both partners and the couple
 - Not being “lulled” into a single stance

AIDS Education and Prevention, 37(1), 1–22, 2025
© 2025 The Guilford Press <https://doi.org/10.1521/aeap.2025.37.1.1>

Couples Have a Way of Speaking: Examining the Characteristics and Stability of Communication Style in HIV Testing Sessions With Male Couples

Tyrel J. Starks, Lila A. Amin, and Jayelin N. Parker



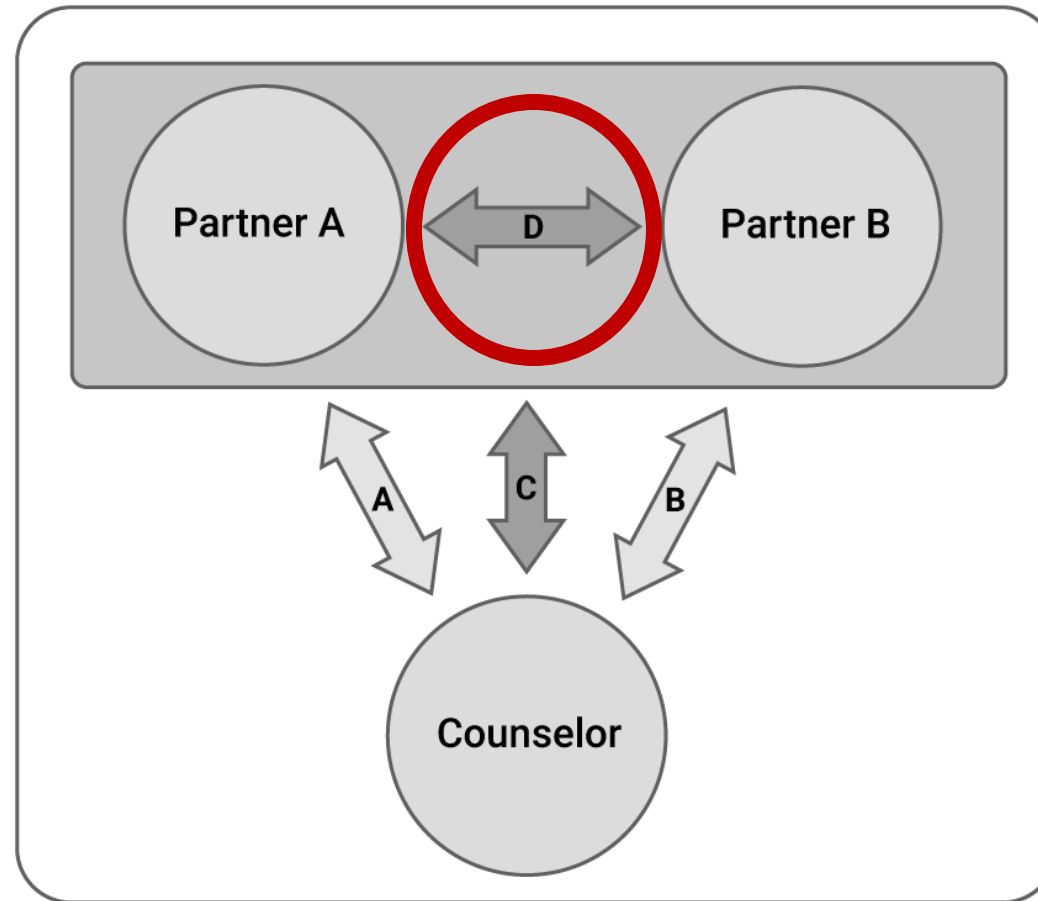
Supporting Relationship Quality

Observing and moderating that 4th pathway

How partners talk to each other matters

Constructive communication

- Enhances relationship quality
- Helps partners understand one another
- Creates opportunities for consensus building.

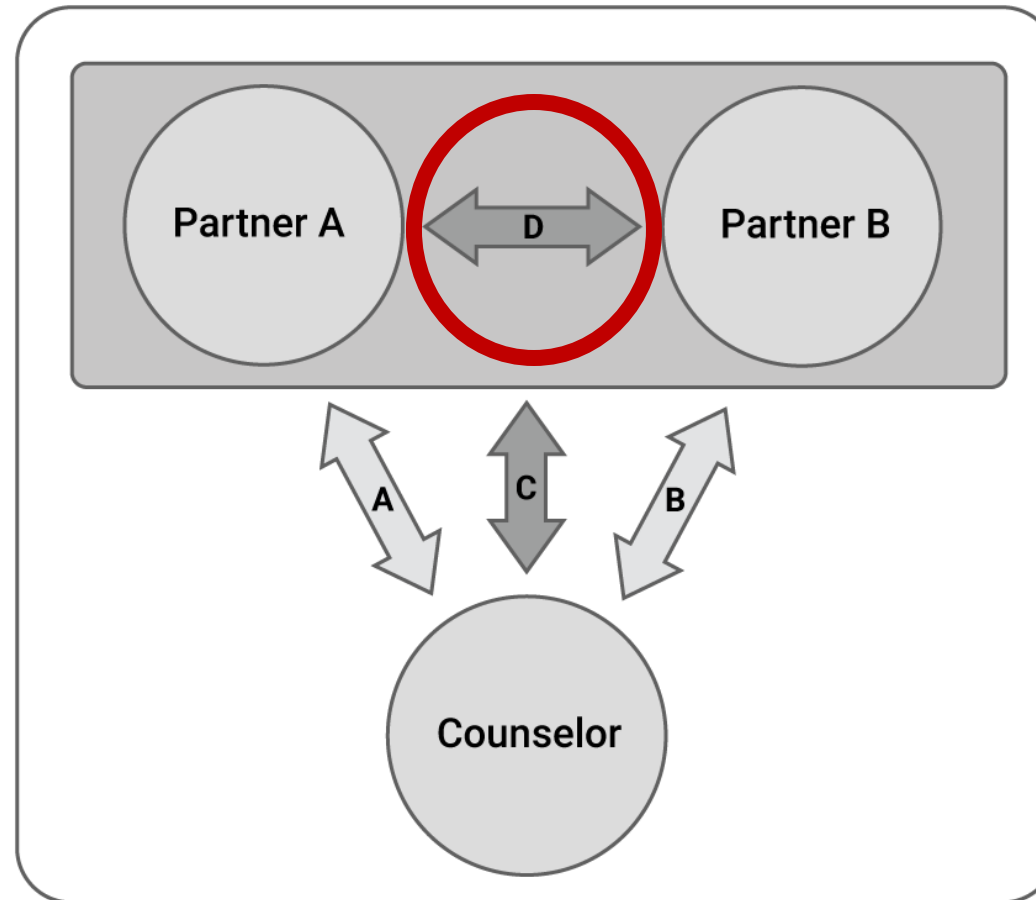


Conflict can diminish relationship quality and derail consensus building.

How partners talk to each other matters

Constructive communication

- Enhances relationship quality
- Helps partners understand one another
- Creates opportunities for consensus building.



Relationship quality

- Enhances constructive communication
- Increases motivation to compromise

The 4 Activities of MI



The 5th Activity of MI with Couples



Facilitating

- **What we might ask about**
 - What works about this relationship?
 - What do you appreciate or value about one another?
 - What do they like about being in this relationship together?
- **What we are listening for** (and also might ask about directly)
 - Satisfaction
 - How happy are you with this relationship?
 - How closely does this relationship resemble your ideal?
 - Emotional closeness
 - Feelings of empathy and connection to a partner's emotions
 - Disclosure of one's thoughts and feelings to a partner
 - Commitment
 - Intention to persist in the relationship
 - Sharing important resources



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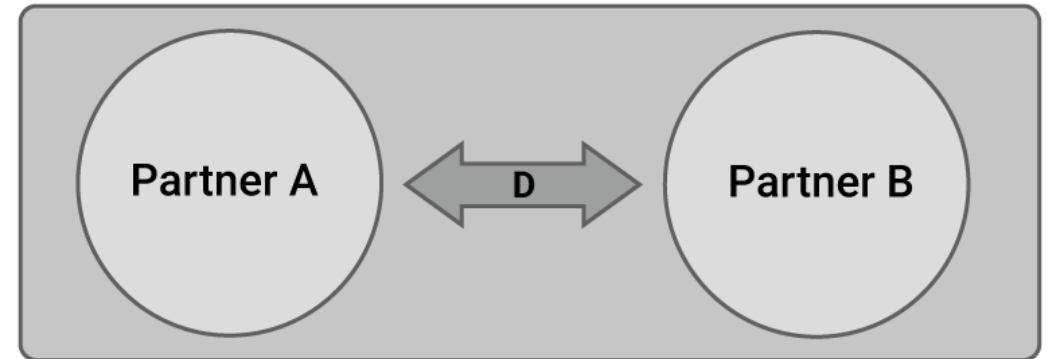
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Interacting with the 4th pathway

- Strengths-based exploration of communication
 - What do you two do well in terms of communication? What are you generally successful at talking out?
 - Where do things get hard?
 - What is challenging to talk through?
- The moderator role
 - Slow communication down
 - Model productive disclosure



What does good communication look like?

- Mutual discussion:
 - Both partners participate in the conversation
- Mutual exchange
 - Both partners disclose information about their perspective
- Mutual negotiation:
 - Partners seek compromise and equity in sacrifices made



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Common communication errors

- Criticism
 - Attacking a partner's character or personality
 - Blaming a partner
- Defensiveness
 - Denying or avoiding one's role in producing the conflict
- Contempt
 - Displaying superiority over a partner
 - Insulting, mocking, or name-calling
- Stonewalling
 - Emotionally disengaging or withdrawing from the conflict

Antidotes

- **Criticism** → Productive disclosure
 - I-statements
- **Defensiveness** → Consider personal role in conflict
- **Contempt** → Stop it
 - Also consider what you respect about the person
- **Avoidance** → Engagement
 - Improve emotion regulation skills
 - Improve assertive communication skills
 - Motivate engagement

Disagreements can accelerate

Instead of listening to each other, partners...

React to their own
assumptions



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Think about what they
want to say.

Focus on convincing,
rather than
understanding, each
other.



Photo from iStock by Jacob Wackerhausen

Uninterrupted, this likely leads to conflict or avoidance.

Finding common ground

Tolerating the discussion of a disagreement is easier when partners remember...

That there are some things that they agree on.



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Why this person (and this relationship) is important to them.

That they have worked together successfully before.



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Supporting constructive communication

And so part of our role is to support them as they...

Correct inaccurate assumptions.



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Express their own feelings, rather than blame one another.

Consider intention, rather than just reacting to effect.



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Planning with Couples

Taking action together

Shared goals can still be SMART Goals

- Specific
- Measurable
- Actionable
- Realistic
- Time-bound



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Principles of dyadic change planning

- Shared goals are more likely to be achieved
 - Both partners are invested
 - Both contribute to success
 - They provide feedback and support to each other
- Any dyadic change plan has a role for both partners
- Embed communication in the plan

3 scenarios

- Planning for mutual change
- Individual change with partner support
- Planning when a shared goal cannot be identified



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Planning for mutual change

- Both partners establish a goal that involves change in their personal behavior
- Both partners also play a role in supporting one another's change



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Individual change with partner support

- Sometimes
 - Change is only relevant to one partner
 - Only one partner is experiencing a problem
- Both partners can still contribute to the change process.



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Planning in the absence of consensus

- Sometimes you cannot find consensus
 - Partners decide to “do their own thing”
- A plan can still help
 - Tolerate the distress of not agreeing
 - Enhance empathy for one another
 - identify personal resources for coping
 - Maximize personal success and minimize relationship damage
 - How can you be respectful of each other?
 - How can you avoid/minimize conflict?



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When the plan is to break up

- What we can do
 - Minimize conflict during the breakup process
 - Consider lessons learned
 - What worked? What was valued?
 - What would you not want to do again?
- What we cannot do
 - Obligate people to stay in relationships when they decide to leave
 - Encourage people to leave because we think they would be better off

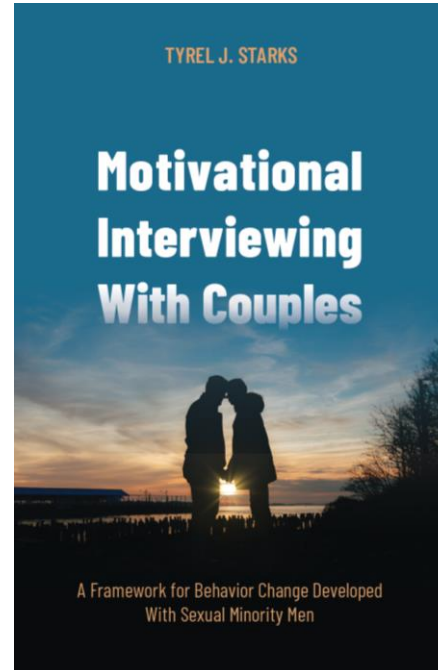


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Clinical Resources



Q&A With Dr. Starks



- We will now discuss select questions that were submitted via the Q&A feature throughout the presentation.
- Due to time constraints, we will not be able to address every question asked.

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