

Six Types of Confrontation in Couples Therapy

Confrontation is, according to Webster's Dictionary, "a technique used in therapy to recognize shortcomings and their possible consequences."

The six types of confrontation are:

1. Soft
2. Empathic
3. Gentle, but Tough
4. Indirect
5. Hard/Tough
6. Bombshell

1. What is a Soft Confrontation?

A soft confrontation is a very mild mention of a specific problem designed to just start bringing it into the client's awareness.

It might be a mild mention in the form of a question.

"Were you drinking last night when you were fighting?"

"It seems like a lot of fights occur when you've been drinking."

It describes the process going on in the couple's interaction.

"I notice that when you withdraw, your wife starts making more demands on you."

2. What is an Empathic Confrontation?

In an empathic confrontation, the therapist names feelings that are barely recognized in order to surface them.

"You seem to feel lonely in your parenting role."

"You seem frightened as you are coming across so angry."

"You are hurt and come out fighting."

The therapist keeps coming back to the feelings and empathically describing the emotional state of the client.

An empathic confrontation can also be used to expose an internal conflict.

"There is a part of you that feels tenacious and does not want to give up and there is another part of you that is sad and grieving and feels that the end is in sight."

Or the therapist might self disclose in a way that uses their countertransference in an empathic way.

"Am I the only one in the room dreading that I might not be able to do it right?"

3. What is a Gentle, but Tough Confrontation?

In a gentle, but tough confrontation the therapist exposes very dysfunctional thoughts or behavior in order to make these very explicit.

This confrontation is said kindly, with a smile, but it does not shy away from a tough subject. It is descriptive and non judgmental.

"You both seem to operate in a competitive framework where you try to get 1-up on each other. Do you really believe that only one of you can get a positive outcome?"

"You operate like many people from the 'get and protect syndrome.' You push to get, while hiding and protecting your own vulnerability."

4. What is an Indirect Confrontation?

In an indirect confrontation, what is said directly to one partner is actually meant for the other partner.

This might be said to a withdrawing spouse and meant for an angry partner who escalates rapidly:

"When your wife makes requests of you, you may say yes, you may say no. In fact, I hope sometimes you will say no because partners need to learn to listen calmly and not to jump to dire conclusions when the other says no."

5. What is a Hard/Tough Confrontation?

This confrontation is designed to hold up a mirror to make the client feel anxious or uncomfortable and to get their attention or show the outcome of what they are doing

It might be a strong description of dysfunctional behavior and when the client evades or wiggles away, the therapist must be tenacious and say it over and over again.

"Let's back up. I don't know if you heard what I said. You keep asking your husband/wife to support you not functioning as a full partner in this marriage. Is that what you mean to ask?"

6. What is a Bombshell Confrontation?

Here the therapist sets a forceful limit. It might mean refusing to continue without change or making therapy contingent on a change so strong, so intense they have to attend to it. Or, it might involve tracing out a devastating future, if the person continues doing the self-destructive behavior.

"I won't schedule another session until you have two coffee dates with each other."

It is often effective to use these in a sequence in a session building tougher and tougher confrontations over time. You can also back off to a lower level one when too much resistance results from making a higher level one.