



Four Ways to Start Your Online Couples Therapy Sessions and Two Case Transcripts

- *Case 1: Paper Exercise*
- *Case 2: Using Chair Work to Identify the Sabatoging Self*

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Introduction

Nancy St. John, MIACP Couples Counselor, Supervisor and Trainer

Nancy has a busy online couples therapy practice and specializes in consulting with counselors and therapists who work with couples. Nancy has trained in all the major models of couples therapy as well Discernment Counseling and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and integrates all of these approaches into her work.

Nancy is passionate about her work with couples. She began training with Dr. Ellyn Bader in 2010 and acknowledges the positive impact the Bader-Pearson Developmental Model of Couples Therapy has had on her personal relationships as well as on her professional work. She is part of a select team hired by Ellyn Bader to teach the Developmental Model and has taken part in The Couples Institute Mentoring Program.



Four Ways to Start Your Online Couples Therapy Sessions

By Nancy St. John, MIACP, Couples Counsellor, Supervisor and Trainer

Getting the process of couples therapy off to a strong start helps to generate a sense of hope and forward momentum in each partner, and increases the couple's trust in you, their therapist.

I have always valued having a good opening ritual for sessions — even back when I worked with couples in person. Now that my work is completely online, I think this is even more important. Couples can no longer use the commute to our office to decompress from the stresses of their day. Some people are having their couples therapy sessions in the same place they do their work, at a kitchen table, or a foot or two away from their bed. It's possible that they haven't even changed positions at their computer, but simply switched from one Zoom meeting room to another. Having a positive opening ritual for the couples therapy session provides a space for each partner to transition their energy from what they've been doing to the work of couples therapy.

How to Begin

Once you have assessed the couple's relationship and they have decided they want to work in therapy, where do you begin? This article describes some of the ways I like to start the session. All of them celebrate what each partner is doing well.

The first 10 or 15 minutes often determines what happens during the rest of the session, so when I greet a couple, I avoid asking "How are you?" because this question can so easily invite regression. Instead, I say to each partner, "It's good to see you."

I tell the couple I want to start our session in a particular way and before we begin, I ask if anything major has happened during the week that they want me to know about. This makes a space for me to hear if something important has happened or there is a crisis that needs to be discussed. If nothing is forthcoming, I use one of these openings:

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1 Expressing Appreciations

"Before I hear what kind of week you've had, whether it was good or possibly stressful, take a few moments now to think about something you love, value or appreciate about your partner and a specific incident from the past week that will describe and encapsulate your appreciation."

Then sit back and ask them to indicate when they are ready. If either partner is slow keep your voice warm and steady. Tell them what you're asking them to do is important and that it's ok to take their time thinking about what they want to share.

When they're ready have them face one another and maybe even make a physical connection like holding hands. Then one person begins to share their appreciation with the other. It is important to keep this exercise slow so their appreciation takes on a ritual-like quality. You can ask the person sharing the appreciation to repeat what they said, and even say it three times so their sentiments have time to sink in. Prompt the listening partner to recap or ask for more information until it feels complete. Then switch roles and repeat the process.

Invite both partners to share what they experienced during this exercise. If the feedback is positive, and it often is, use the opportunity to give a little input on the importance of acknowledging their strengths and what is going well in their relationship.

When both partners have expressed their appreciations and absorbed the good feelings that come with this exercise, give them strokes by sharing what moved you. Then tell them they're off to a great start!

2 Positive Focus for Week

Another way to open the session is by having each person identify and describe to their partner one specific thing they focused on improving in their relationship during the last week.

3 Positive Intention for Session

Invite each partner to create a positive intention for the session by identifying something they will do that they will feel proud of, and describing specifically how they are going to make this session productive. Write down each of their intentions and ask them to do the same. Tell them to keep their intention where they can see it during the session and ask if it is ok for you to remind them of what they chose if you see them going off track.

4 Question of Attunement

Drs. Ellyn Bader and Pete Pearson, Founders of The Couples Institute, recommend this pair of questions that starts in one session and then serves as a great opener in the next. Here's how it

goes. In one session have each partner ask their partner, "What can I do this coming week to make your week go a little bit better or make you feel more loved, valued, and appreciated?"

Work with each person to think of something that would be meaningful to them. It has to be SMART, which is a pneumatic for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time limited. If they say something general like, "I just want you to be nice," you can say, "Think about one thing your partner could do that you would recognize as them being nice to you." Keep crafting their response until they identify an actionable step for their partner that would be meaningful for them to experience over the coming week.

At the start of the next session check if they followed through on what their partner wanted and ask about any positive impact it had on their relationship. This is a great way to bring continuity to your work – linking what they agreed to do during the week into the start of your next session.

I hope you find these openers helpful in your work with couples and that your sessions start well and promote continued growth in your clients — both in person and online!

Case 1: Paper Exercise

Zoe: I guess he's giving it to me.

Arin: This is something that's important to you so you should keep it.

Zoe: It's my core principles.

Arin: I understand. I will find something else.

Zoe: Doesn't that seem like we don't care?

Arin: I picked something important, but I wouldn't enjoy it if it was on back of you giving up your core principles. I'll create something else.

Zoe: (silence) This has never happened before. It's a sweet sentiment but this wouldn't happen.

Arin: What I said was real. I don't like to hear it's pretend. (long silence)

Therapist: Are you finished?

Arin: I think we've decided.

Zoe: I don't feel great... I'm confused. You made the choice for me.

Arin: (angrily) I didn't choose for you. I made a choice for me. (silence)

Therapist: One minute left... (long pause) Are you finished?

Arin: You're presumably accepting. (silence)

Therapist: How are you feeling?

Arin: Sad because I gave up something important.

Zoe: I feel conflicted. You made a choice and convinced me that I made the choice.

Case 2: Using Chair Work to Identify the Sabotaging Self

Pat and Amy are in a long-term hostile marriage. Pat has been in alcohol recovery for many years and describes feeling depressed, restless and discontented. He is self-employed but is out of work for long periods as he finds it hard to look for new contracts. Pat has a pattern of making promises to Amy that he doesn't keep, and he hates when Amy criticises him. When Pat and Amy began CT, Amy is infuriated with Pat's inactivity and his passive aggressive behavior. Amy has been the primary earner throughout their marriage. She says she has raised their children single-handedly while Pat plays golf and goes to AA meetings. Here is a transcript of Pat's first chair dialogue:

Therapist: Pat, when you began couples therapy one of your goals was to make some positive changes in your life but there's something that gets in the way of you making these changes. I think it would be helpful to see if this is still a goal you want to work on, because if it's not, you're going to feel I'm pushing you to do something you really don't want to do. Does that make sense?

Pat: Yeah, it does, but I wouldn't resent you. I understand where you are coming from. I want to try to break some of my habits.

Therapist: Habits like what?

Pat: Like every bad habit.

Therapist: Will you say one of the habits you want to break?

Pat: The inability to do what I have to do.

Therapist: That's a big thing, isn't it?

Pat: Probably the biggest.

Therapist: So, there is a part of you that really wants to make some changes in your life. You want to be organised and reliable and get into a good routine. There's another part of you though that holds back from making changes. It would be helpful to let those two parts have a dialogue so we can get a clearer picture of what is going on. Would you be willing to do that?

Pat: I can't see it doing any harm.

Therapist: Amy, I want you to listen to Pat and see what you recognize, you may hear something you haven't heard before and when we're finished I will ask you to share your feedback. (We spend some time organising chairs so Pat has 2 chairs and Amy is sitting where I can still see her.)

Pat, for the next few minutes I'm going to be asking you to move between these two chairs. There's part of you that wants to make changes in your life. Will you speak from that part first?

Pat: I always had ambitions to be a normal person and do ordinary things but there's rebelliousness or childishness in me, something like that.

Therapist: Stay with the part of you that wants to be normal.

Pat: I never say it to myself anymore. Why me? Why do I get all this shit?

Therapist: A part of you that wants to feel normal, but there is something else affecting you.

Pat: Yeah. It's the dark side of me.

Therapist: Switch to the other chair. The part that was just speaking wants a normal life. What does this side say?

Pat: You miserable little fucker. He whines and moans about everything.

Therapist: What can you say about this side?

Pat: This side is ferociously arrogant.

Therapist: Arrogant?

Pat: Very arrogant and dismissive and bullying. I see my father over there and my mother here.

Therapist: From where you are sitting now what do you want to say?

Pat: I'm criticizing how weak that person is.

Therapist: You're undermining that part of you.

Pat: Yes. That's what I see.

Therapist: Switch back to the side that wants to be normal and make changes. What's it like hearing the other side?

Pat: I'm very resentful towards him.

Therapist: What does his presence feel like?

Pat: A threat. I'm wary to do things because I know sabotage is there. I'd need to have two safety nets to do anything.

Therapist: From where you are now what do you want in life?

Pat: Normality and fun.

Therapist: Sounds like you want a nice life. What would you be doing if you had a normal life?

Pat: I'd be making it a lot easier for Amy.

Therapist: This part of you wants Amy to have an easier life? What else does this part want?

Pat: To be of use. To do what you have to and more.

Therapist: Switch back, let's hear more from here. What are your thoughts on that?

Pat: That feels like a threat.

Therapist: The part that's clear on what would make you happy?

Pat: Yeah. This guy here is a terrible asshole. He's vicious. Empathy isn't on this side. He's tough.

Therapist: A coldness about him.

Pat: Absolute coldness. A calculating coldness. This guy would probably shoot someone and not feel remorse, but the guy over there wouldn't.

Therapist: That's the softer side, the side that's clear about the kind of a life he wants to live. But this side of you wants what?

Pat: It doesn't matter what's going on. I don't want to change.

Therapist: What does this side do to make sure changes don't happen?

Pat: He takes over. He's on my shoulder saying, *"You're weak, you're weak, you're weak."*

Therapist: The part over there is clear about the future he wants but this side isn't feeling good at all. From here you feel under threat when the other part knows what he wants to do to be happy.

Ok Pat, go back to your own chair and we'll come out of this now... You were great, talking from both sides.

Amy, I'd like to hear from you what that was like.

Amy: I've never seen anything like that before. Getting a glimpse of him that could be good (becoming tearful) but it's this... (pointing to the empty chair) that messes everything up. You can't keep going on like this. Neither of us can. It's wearing us out. I know this is what you want, what both of us want, but unless you control the other side it's going to destroy us.

Therapist: Pat, what Amy just said, did that feel like an attack to you?

Pat: No, it didn't.

Therapist: It was different to other times when you feel Amy is criticizing you.

Pat: Yes.