Cognitive behavioral couple therapy: CASE STUDY

BACKGROUND

José and Indira are 45 and 42 years old, respectively, have been together for 20 years, and have been married for 18 years. They have two children, Elena, 16, and Roberto, 13. José grew up in Arizona, where his parents have lived since emigrating from Mexico when he was 2 years old. Indira was born in India, and her parents have lived in northern California (near José and Indira’s current home) since she was 5 years old. Both partners have college degrees and work full-time outside the home. The couple sought treatment, saying that “things just aren’t working” between them. Their lives are so busy that routine household chores barely get done; they rarely see their two children; and they feel they have lost intimacy as a couple. Their children are doing well enough, although Indira believes her daughter “is growing up too fast,” and José is concerned about some of his son’s friends. They feel like business partners rather than lovers, and their sex life is infrequent and routine. They visit each other’s extended families periodically, but rarely have time for socializing with other couples or families. José complains that Indira’s family of origin tried to interfere and impose their traditional views on them and that he has assumed most of the household chores because Indira has been working long hours since her career began progressing. He also says that although she is a loving mother, she rarely has any time to do things for the children. The partners are abrupt and irritable with each other and rarely discuss what is happening between them directly. A colleague of José’s recommended a problem-focused couple therapist.

ASSESSMENT

Before the first session:

✓ Couples Pre-Counseling Inventory (CPCI; Stuart & Jacobsen, 1987)

After the first session:

✓ Review of their background information & inventory data
✓ Interview each of them separately

Third session:

✓ Bring them back together for further assessment and feedback

Findings:

✓ Discrepancies of 3 or more points (on a scale of 5) on the CPCI between Indira’s and José’s ratings on 4 out of 11 general sections: 1. General and Specific Happiness, 2. Communication, 3. Sexual Adjustment, and 4. Division of Home, Child Care, and Work Responsibilities

At the end of the third session:

➢ Developmentally, their relationship began with excitement and intensity and progressed well during times of low stress.
➢ As their lives became busier and they took on more responsibilities, their basic affection and commitment to each other allowed them to function effectively for the most part, but as stresses and responsibilities increased, problems often remained unsolved, and their vitality and communication as a couple decreased
➢ Their implicit expectation was that their earlier free and easy style would carry them through times that demanded greater planning, clearer communication, negotiation skills, and free time for themselves as a couple. As the stress increased, so did their sense of not getting what they needed from the relationship. Although each had successfully individuated from their respective family of origin, the pressure for Indira to be a traditional homemaker and for José to assert himself as head of the...
household, and their overloaded schedules weighed on them and resulted in some guilt, repression of feelings, and isolation from other dual-career couples.

- Their difficulties focused mainly on their General and Specific Happiness, Communication, Sexual Adjustment, and Home and Family Responsibilities (as identified on the CPCI), and these issues were compounded by the discrepancy in their respective perceptions of these areas.
- Their basic acceptance of each other, energy to work on their difficulties, and commitment to each other indicated strong potential for progressing to a more satisfying level in their relationship.

- Discussion of treatment plan (continued during the fourth session) & signing written contract

**INTERVENTION**

**Written contract based on assessment:**

1. Weekly conjoint sessions of 75 minutes, initially for six more weeks followed by a mutual evaluation of progress and an option for renewal
2. The treatment would focus on:
   a) The partners’ perceptions of their early relationship and style of relating and their expectations for dealing with children, home, work, and family
   b) Discussion and rehearsal of clear communication concepts and methods
   c) Discussion and rehearsal of effective problem-solving techniques
   d) Discussion and evaluation of the importance of both partners having the sense that they are receiving and giving equitably in the relationship
   e) Determination of each partner's ability to accept differences in the other and maintain a consistent sense of commitment
   f) In-session and at-home exercises, including some reading and videos on the concepts and skills they were working on
   g) Sessions at home where they would discuss their concerns about their children individually with each child and together as a family

- Balance between cognitive and behavioral interventions

**Progress:**

- Session 4 & 5: focused on cognitive aspects of initial perceptions and expectations about the relationship → “Why should we have to work so hard on our relationship?”
- Session 6 & 7: brief explanation of the principles of clear communication (handout: “I-messages”); behavioral rehearsal & role reversal; homework: practice during week
- Session 8: communication & problem solving (identification and prioritization of key problem areas) → feeling tone between couple more vital and positive
- Session 9: concerns about children (different perceptions regarding them)
- Mutually supportive process for problem solving was created, they proceeded to work on their sexual relationship and division of home responsibilities for six additional session following the end of contract → total of 15 sessions
- Integration of cognitive and communication & problem solving dimensions 😊
- Equal behavior exchange, clear communication and good problem solving skills, all aspects of a relationship can remain functional and satisfactory over time

**REFERENCES**


**FURTHER READING**