Demystifying the Difficult Couple  
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Outline

Hour 1:

Objective: To become familiar with common couple patterns

Format: Didactic

1. How couple interactions are developed
   1. John Gottman, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt and Stonewalling
   2. 5 types of couples: Conflict Avoiders, Volatile Couples, Validating couples, Hostile Couples, Hostile-Detached Couples
   3. Toxicity levels and antidotes to the couple patterns.
2. Recognizing maladaptive patterns through the couple’s descriptions using the typologies developed and described by Susan Johnson (e.g., Recognizing Demon Dialogues, assessing for interaction types).
3. Recognizing the single conflict style that is the most toxic (Busby & Loyer-Carlson)

Hour 2:

Objective: To become Familiar with assessment strategies to determine couple patterns

Format: Modeling and practice

1. Assessing for process
   1. Resisting the urge to track client stories
   2. Questioning for meaning
   3. Creating a multisystemic lens

Hour 3:

Objective: To learn de-escalation and recovery strategies that increase the couple’s abilities to use effective interpersonal skills

Format: Didactic and practice

1. Conceptualizing the process
2. Validation skills that de-escalate the clients
3. Recovery strategies that increase the couple’s abilities to use effective interpersonal skills
4. Managing conflict-habituated and hostile couples
5. Increase flexibility as couple transitions through the process

Demystifying the Difficult Couple

Working with high conflict couples requires a systemic lens. Couple members mix with each other to create a more powerful interpersonal process than either alone create. Workshop participants will learn to identify and understand the reactions and responses of the couple members, and skills to shape reactivity and resistance.

The whole is greater than the sum of its the parts. This is first statement that most systems therapists are taught. Working with high conflict couples is made easier when the professional is aware of how each member of the couple mix with the other to create their own system of interaction. This created interaction is much more powerful than the interpersonal process either member alone creates. Once the pattern is identified and understood, the reactions and responses of the couple member is predictable and can be readily shaped. It is risky to work with members of the couple as if they are individual clients. Assessing the theme and pattern of the couple process provides an interpersonal process map that cannot be developed from the individual’s report alone. The purpose of this workshop is to increase the coach’s comfort with the systemic lens when working with one or both members of a couple, and to help the other members of the collaborative team understand the social psychology of intimate relationships. Because attorneys are often the most important influence in the collaborative process, members of the legal profession will benefit by learning what to look for in their client’s reports and responses, and how to best convey that information to the mental health professional to assist in the initial assessments.

This workshop has three components: a) To become familiar with common couple patterns such as those articulated by John Gottman (The Four Horseman) and Susan Johnson (Emotionally Focused Therapy); b) Familiarize the participant with assessment strategies to determine couple patterns, c) To learn de-escalation and recovery strategies that increase the couple’s abilities to use effective interpersonal skills during potentially high-stress meetings.