

Has your partner been diagnosed, sight unseen, by another health professional?

Therapist diagnosing the partner of a distressed person without direct knowledge of the partner is an issue that has bothered many of us in the field in varying degrees for many years.

Significant harm can be done to couple relationships by well meaning therapists and primary health care workers who operate on the belief that marital problems are primarily the result of individual pathology.

Here are three cases from a colleague.

Example 1.

A couple, having been to five other therapists, came in a state of near hopelessness. Prior couple therapists had seen the two jointly. They would immediately become interested in “the wife’s pathology.” She would soon refuse to return. Each therapist “helped the husband understand” that his wife was “a borderline.” They “helped” him understand that she had a “very serious problem” and that he “needed to be more compassionate.” This woman survived repeated sexual abuse by a stepfather who dehumanized her by telling her she was crazy and had “a personality disorder.” Each therapist thereby replicated her trauma by putting the husband in the position of being “the healthy one” with “a sick wife.” It severely compounded the distress they were already experiencing.

After 20 sessions, the couple is now moving past how degraded she felt and he lives with the remorse for how he demeaned her and colluded with the previous therapist’s bias, albeit unintentionally.

The current couple therapist committed to her at the outset that he would not pathologize her. She has not once balked at attending a session although the sessions have been excruciatingly painful for them both.

Example 2.

Prior to their first sessions the lady partner provided the therapist with a seven-page email that she had also sent to all her friends and family outlining all her husband’s faults. Near the top of the first page was her statement that a prior therapist has diagnosed him with Aspergers and/or Autism. The entire letter was documentation to support that claim. This socially awkward man had been presented early in the marriage with overwhelming circumstances not of either of their making and he felt totally inadequate. Once his wife, being abandoned by him, reacted in anger, he became more and more withdrawn and less and less confident of his words or even thoughts. When he first came to the couple therapist’s office he could hardly speak and he could not look at her.

Within a few sessions, with lots of support and understanding he became exceptionally articulate. In contrast to someone with Autism Spectrum Disorder, he read her every clue perfectly. She was angry and he was inadequate.

When the couple therapist talked to *the man's* new therapist, whom his wife had sent him to for his Autism, the therapist asked if the wife was "as angry a person as the husband said she was." It was about to start all over again, this time from the other direction.

The wife can now ask for what she needs from him. She, in her words, has never done that before. He can tell her that he wants a safe relationship too, and he does so with tears in his eyes. She has them too.

Example 3. A nearby therapist has worked with two of the couple therapist's clients. In each case the therapist has demonized the spouse without ever meeting them. She repeatedly has told the wife in one of the couples that she does not "need to take such abuse" from her husband. (The couple therapist reported that the woman initially was one of the angriest, blaming, abusive clients he had seen.) When the husband became defensive in the face of her withering criticism, she pointed out to the therapist how abusive he was being. Indeed, his defensiveness felt like abuse to her as she was repeatedly invalidated as a little girl. His "abuse" turned out to be massive anxiety about "getting into trouble, making it worse and setting off another attack."

When he was finally able to tell her how scary she was, she wept and said that she had no idea she was hurting him. It took almost two years for her to completely stop telling him he was an abuser.

The couple therapist was never able to help the individual therapist understand that the relationship was not as it appeared from her perspective. She clung to her position even when the wife returned to her from the couple sessions and said, "My husband is not abusing me, there is a problem *between* us."

These examples from a couple therapist, show what can happen when no-one is labeled as the "sick" one. It opens the door for surprising avenues of healing. The therapist gave these examples in an address to his American colleagues. He continued:

'Please don't support a position that says, "We are having problems because there is something wrong with you." I know these clients are just trying to understand what is happening in their lives and are looking for answers. But, I have seen no good come from the answer being, "I married a spouse with a problem."

There *may* be room for legitimate diagnoses of mental and emotional problems, although I increasingly have my doubts. It may be that a particular spouse can benefit from a specialized treatment to supplement the couple therapy. Some people *do* have a bipolar disorder, or are depressed, or are schizophrenic.

Some people have drug and alcohol problems that make relationship impossibly challenging. But please be *very* cautious about concluding that the couple is having problems *because* of that.

Maybe couples have problems because couple relationships are difficult. Maybe these other things make those problems more difficult to work out. None are having problems *because* one is an addict. It's just that it sure doesn't help.

Some people, particularly women, *are* abused, and need our assistance in keeping themselves safe. We *do* need to be astute in determining when our clients are at risk.

We must be very careful, however, to know what those signs are and how to distinguish between reports of emotional pain and very real danger to potential victims of abuse.

Please reserve judgment when an individual client describes their spouse's "symptoms." Please remember that you are looking through the lens of the excruciating pain that develops when our love relations turn sour.

Please try to see that the problem might be how the couple is attempting to solve the problem.'

M.C.