

# Couple's Coaching

## Juliet Grayson

By Eve Menezes Cunningham

**W**e all deserve a good enough relationship and sex life," says Juliet Grayson, a psychosexual therapist and NLP Master Practitioner (several times over). "Most couples come to me too late. They've been having problems for a year to 18 months. Sexual problems may have been going on for three years or longer.

"Some seek support because they need help telling their partner the relationship is over. The majority think that it's their last chance but definitely give it a go. The relationship is the biggest client, then the two individuals. Sometimes I'll refer them to another therapist for individual therapy."

**It's normal to go through relationship problems. It's abnormal to not**

Juliet tells couples that she's working with them to help them stay together "but if one or both of you decide to separate I will help you do that with dignity. This isn't about going back into your old relationship – it's broken. This is about creating a new relationship you can both buy into. It's not my job to stop them collapsing

as a couple. It's my job to support them through their journey. That supports me. It's normal to go through relationship problems. It's abnormal to not.

"Couples work is different to individual work. There are big issues around proximity, autonomy and exploring intimacy. I work with couples of all kinds. Couples, a parent and child or two people in an organisation. The whole thing is about couples therapy is you have to be prepared to step into your authority, get in there and be strong enough to hold them."

Even if you work mainly with individuals, if you ever work with couples, or even groups





## You have to be prepared to step into your authority, get in there and be strong enough to hold them

in workshops or other trainings, these couples coaching tips from Juliet will help you empower your clients to help themselves when you're not there.

### Decentering

"Decentering gets couples to talk to each other rather than doing it through the therapist," says Juliet. She can then observe and ask questions but the couple (or team) is learning more about their own communication styles and what they can practice doing differently between sessions.

"It gives insight into how they relate and information they may not report verbally. Rather than having the couple talking to me, I have them face and talk to each other. You can then point out what you notice (if one of them is being quiet or if one's talking a lot). You can even use psychogeography, perhaps by moving your chair to support the quieter person or by pointing things out like 'I notice when I ask how the week's gone, it's always Jane...'. Ask questions at certain points, like, 'Let me just stop you, how does it feel in your body when

you do this?'"

The approach gets couples to dive straight into negotiating with each other. "Their dependency on the therapist is minimised. It also helps couples to stay with one issue." If you're working with a couple in this way, Juliet says, "Don't be available through eye contact. Look using a soft focus keeping both of them in the picture, using peripheral vision. Use hand

### Relationship cycle

- Attraction
- Commitment
- Readjustments (work, children arriving / leaving, infidelity, illness, retirement)
- Aging (menopause)
- Death

### Use your words (Extra tips for decentering)

While observing the decentered conversations, there are lots of things you can do to reframe clients' language in a way that helps them move forward. These include:

- helping them focus on the future rather than dwelling on the past
- referring to themselves as "I" rather than "we"
- going from using generalisations to become more specific
- focusing on what's equal rather than the inequalities
- checking out assumptions rather than falling into the trap of mind reading
- turning one person's monologue into a dialogue they're both invested in
- avoiding interruptions by listening and reflecting back
- keeping them focused rather than constantly changing topics
- changing the order of the way things are said to avoid a "sting in the tail"
- encouraging them to avoid "buts". If I say "I'd love to go out tonight but I'm really tired", am I going out? What about if I say "I'm really tired but I will come out" The "but" deletes the first part of the sentence. Replace it with a more flexible "I'm tired and I'll go out so I'll leave a bit early."
- seeing whether they're at cause (proactive) or effect (victim)?

gestures to get them back to talking to each other. Look at them when they're doing it well. Talk to the person who's listening."

If things are at a stalemate, asking them what attracted them to each other, while getting them to remain decentered, can help them bridge the angst. Often, Juliet finds reframing a problem helps her clients. For example, with a couple who were arguing because he wanted to feel like a bigger part of the family and she wanted him around more, Juliet chunked down to point out "there's actually a lot of commonality."

### Reciprocity Negotiation

I loved learning about complex equivalents when I did my NLP training. "He forgot my birthday so obviously doesn't love me" may be one of endless assumptions we make about people when we're feeling in need of some reassurance.

Even now, I often catch myself thinking along the lines of "\_\_\_ is late again. That means \_\_\_ doesn't care about me." →



## Balance the boat

Do you notice that your couple is clinging to specific roles? One is always the clingy one while the other is less available? One thinks they're always right while the other is always wrong? One's nice while the other's angry? When there are polarities, our impulse (e.g. becoming nicer to stop the

angry one getting angrier) can make things worse. You getting angrier might make them nicer. You arriving late, for once, may make them arrive earlier than all the previous pleas you've made. Juliet recommends mirroring and matching energy levels and content if you're going to mismatch tone.

→ (Fortunately, now when I catch myself thinking unhelpful thoughts like this, I reign them in. I laugh at myself and remind myself of the things \_\_\_ does to show \_\_\_ does care).

Juliet says, "We read certain behaviours as demonstrating a label." She brings this into her couples work by getting her clients to talk about the things they do that show their partners they care. "We often do for people what we want ourselves."

She helps couples relearn how to negotiate by:

- Inviting them to make a symbolic behavioural request – this means asking the partner to do something that will help them feel loved. It might be anything from pausing the TV to say hello when you get home to

cooking your favourite dinner.

- Turning their complaints into wishes – Some couples may be pretty stuck and so focused on what they don't want, they can't even imagine what might help them feel more loved. Help them reframe their complaints so they have a better understanding of what they do want.
- Forming tasks – Think of different levels of difficulty / effort. Saying "Hi" is much easier than preparing your favourite meal. Think of all the different ways they could show each other they care. Juliet says it has to be "Something that's very easy for them to assimilate into their daily life."
- Make the tasks reciprocal - This doesn't

mean "I will only do this if you do yours" but tasks are equal in terms of effort. For example, a cup of tea in bed every morning might equal cooked dinner once a week.

If your couple is having trouble coming up with tasks, ask questions like:

- What is it you don't like about your partner?
- What would you like him / her to do differently?
- What one thing would be a start?

Juliet says, "If you're in a relationship and you keep asking for something you'll never get, you'll quickly feel like you're not getting your needs met."

When clients come back for their next session and haven't done their homework, Juliet's quick to reframe things by saying something like "I think I've been overambitious" or "you're not really ready for this negotiation – we'll come back to it in a few weeks" rather than saying anything that makes them feel worse. "There's no such thing as failure, only feedback. 'You didn't do the homework? That's great – let's explore why...' If it carries on, I get frustrated and point out that 'I need help to help you' but while it's giving new info that's fine. Having a failed marriage behind me has really helped me as a couple's counsellor." She stresses the need to normalise their experiences so they stop feeling like they're the only one.

"The more important someone is to you, the harder it is to be honest. For example, 'No, I don't like that dress'. As intimacy increases so does vulnerability. The closer I get, the more important they become, the less I want to lose them. If Person A is dependent and Person B is Independent, the Independent one should do a lot of reassuring for the Dependent one. The Dependent one then becomes stronger. It's a dance." ●

## We often do for people what we want ourselves

### Different types of intimacy

Juliet warns against expecting one person to meet all our needs. We can have a level of emotional intimacy, social intimacy, recreational intimacy and intellectual intimacy with people other than our partner.



### Resources

[www.therapyandcounselling.co.uk](http://www.therapyandcounselling.co.uk) – Juliet's workshops

[www.basrt.org.uk](http://www.basrt.org.uk) - British Association of Sexual and Relationship Therapists