



**Our**  
Relationship

**Integrating the  
OurRelationship program  
into Couple Therapy**



# Overview

The OurRelationship program can be integrated into a course of couple therapy (whether provided in-person or via telehealth) to reduce the number of sessions. Below, we illustrate how the OurRelationship program can be integrated into an eight-session course of couple therapy. We believe this model provides an optimal balance between effectiveness and ease of attendance for most couples – especially when they are facing substantial constraints to attending in-person couple therapy. After presenting an eight-session model, we also describe alterations to the structure when more or fewer sessions of couple therapy are available. We also present ideas on how the eight-session model can be adapted for therapists taking an EFT or Gottman approach to couple therapy.

*NOTE: The following content was adapted from the following article: “Integrating the online OurRelationship Program into a stepped care model of couple therapy” in the Journal of Family Therapy by Yunying Le and Brian Doss.*

## SESSION 1

# Initial Meeting and Program Introduction

An initial, conjoint session is recommended before couples start the OurRelationship program. This session – which can be conducted either via telehealth or in-person – should be used to achieve several goals typical of an initial session of couple therapy: **a)** socialize couples to the treatment process; **b)** obtain informed consent for treatment; **c)** develop rapport with each partner; and **d)** collect information about the couple's strengths and presenting problems. Additional goals of the first session are to introduce couples to the OurRelationship program and explain how it will be used as part of the treatment. The Observe phase is assigned as homework for the couple to complete before returning for the following session.



## SESSION 2

# Initial Meetings with Both Partners

Session 2 takes place after couples complete the Observe phase of the program. We recommend dividing the session into three parts: two individual sessions and a conjoint session. In a 50-minute-long appointment, we recommend 20 minutes for each individual session and 10 minutes for the conjoint session.

The goal of the individual session is to determine whether it is appropriate for the couple to proceed with couple therapy. Three areas that are important to consider are levels of intimate partner violence in the relationship, any ongoing affairs, and each partner's commitment level. When partners deny intimate partner violence leading to injury within the past year and indicate no fear of physical reprisal for voicing their

views, it is generally considered safe for the couple to proceed with couple therapy. In fact, there is evidence suggesting that both couple therapy and the OurRelationship program can improve the relationship of couples with mild-moderate IPV and even create meaningful reductions in aggression (Doss et al., 2020; Simpson et al., 2008). Additionally, if partners are not having ongoing secret affairs that they refuse to disclose or end and if they are committed to improving the relationship, even if that commitment is ambivalent, then couple therapy is appropriate. If time remains during the individual portions of this session, the therapist should assess for relevant background information for the Differences and Emotional sensitivities relevant to the DEEP analysis of their core issue(s).

During the final 10 minutes of the session, the therapist works conjointly with couples to review the fun activities each partner selected to do as a couple and decide whether the couple would like to attempt any of those activities in the next week. Next, the therapist provides an overview of the Understand phase of the program and assigns it as homework. As part of this discussion, the therapist and couple jointly decide whether couples will share their DEEP understandings with each other before the next session or during the next session. For less conflictual couples, we generally recommend that they have the conversation before the session so therapists have more time during the session to debrief the conversation and review the couple's DEEP understanding. However, more conflictual couples may get into an argument while sharing their DEEP understandings. If this is a concern for the therapist or the couple, we recommend waiting to share their DEEP understanding during the next therapy session (as described next).



### SESSION 3

## Feedback Following the Understand Phase

The goal of Session 3 is to work with the couple to solidify their DEEP understanding of the core issue(s) and provide them with an overview of the upcoming couple therapy sessions.

## Couples Sharing During the Session.

For couples who have not yet shared their DEEP understanding with each other, partners first log into the program and complete the DEEP conversation activity with the therapist present. For each of the four DEEP components, the program guides each partner to take turns sharing with the other what they wrote for the component following a speaker-listener structure. If the conversation becomes heated, the therapist is there to redirect. For example, if any strong emotions are triggered, we recommend focusing on partners' emotional experience, both surface and hidden, at the moment. Once both partners have shared their perspectives, the therapist can offer additional insight or conceptualization that may enhance the couple's understanding. These moments provide opportunities for partners to learn more about each other and for therapists to guide partners to engage with each other in a more compassionate and supportive manner and gain new and positive experiences of the two of them interacting around their core issue(s).

## Couples Who Shared Before the Session.

For couples who have shared their DEEP understanding as part of the program, therapists can start the session debriefing the conversation. If the conversation went well, we recommend exploring any positive emotions partners experienced at the time of the conversation and take the opportunity to heighten these emotions to facilitate emotional closeness between partners. Questions such as "What allowed this conversation to go better than usual?" and "What was it like to share this with your partner?" can be helpful. On the other hand, if the conversation did not go well, therapists can debrief it using the framework of their DEEP understanding and help them identify what got them into trouble. For example, were they sucked into their typical pattern of communication? Did they get upset and express their surface emotions rather than the more vulnerable, hidden emotions?

In both scenarios (partners sharing the DEEP understanding before or during the session), session 3 is concluded with a review of any positive activities the couple chose to do in the previous week. Finally, the therapist provides an overview of the upcoming therapy sessions. Specifically, couples learn about **(1)** the goals of these sessions, **(2)** the Weekly Questionnaire that they need to complete prior to each intervention session and **(3)** how this information will be used in the session to help achieve goals of the treatment.

## SESSION 4 & 5

# Applying and Expanding the DEEP Understandings

In these sessions, therapists help couples apply their DEEP understanding to recent relationship events. To help focus these conversations, each partner completes the Weekly Questionnaire before each session – listing the most positive and negative interactions they had with the other partner since last session, upcoming events that could potentially be relationally challenging for them, and the relative importance among these. Given the limited amount of time in each session, we recommend focusing on issues that are most pressing or ones that are more appropriate given the emotional tone at the moment. We expect this continued application of the DEEP understanding will facilitate greater acceptance of things that are less amenable in the relationship such as natural differences between partners and their emotional sensitivities and help set a collaborative tone in the relationship. This enhanced understanding will prepare partners to work together in the following sessions to make specific and deliberate changes to improve their core issue(s).

The Respond phase of the program is assigned as homework at the end of session 5. Similar to the Understand conversation, therapists need to decide whether it is more appropriate for the couple to share with each other the solutions each has come up with as part of the program (i.e., outside of session) or during the next therapy session.

## SESSION 6

# Reviewing Changes from the Respond Phase

During the Respond phase of the program, each partner proposes specific behavioral changes in the three areas they themselves would like to make and would like their partners to make: patterns of communication during the core issue (e.g., blame,

avoidance), patterns of recovery from the core issue (e.g., fast vs. slow, discuss vs. just move on), and specific behaviors comprising the core issue(s). The goal of this session is to ensure that the changes partners propose are specific, feasible and appropriate. Therapists can help partners to select changes they both agree to try.

### **Couples Sharing During the Session.**

For couples who have not shared their ideas for change, they start the session with the conversation activity in the Respond phase of the program, which guides partners to move through these three areas of change sequentially. The conversation activity follows a four-stage problem-solving structure: a) presenting each of their ideas for change; b) discussing pros and cons of each potential idea; c) picking one or more changes that each partner will make; and d) setting a date to re-evaluate the changes. As with session 3, the therapist can provide guidance and feedback as appropriate to help guide the couple towards solutions that will be most effective.

### **Couples Who Shared before the Session.**

For those who have completed the conversation activity before the session, therapists can start with checking in about how the conversation went. If things went well, therapists can highlight those positive experiences to reinforce their new experiences interacting around the core issues(s). If things did not go well, the focus is on strengthening or restoring the collaborative relationships partners developed in the intervention sessions before moving on. Next, therapists can turn to the solutions that the couple decided on (if any). The goal is to work with couples to ensure that the changes are feasible, will actually address the issue, and are relatively balanced across partners. Even for core issues where one partner objectively needs to change more, the other partner can commit to changes that will facilitate the first partner's changes.

Finally, in both types of Session 6, therapists should assign the remaining activities in the Respond phase as homework. These activities focus on the difficulties of deliberate change to inoculate couples against both difficulties implementing their changes as well as the inevitable slip-ups that will occur.



## SESSION 7

# Integrating Acceptance and Change

The goal of session 7 is to support partners as they implement deliberate changes. Couples may have encountered challenges as they try to implement the changes they agreed to and some of their attempts may not have been very successful. For those who have tried, therapists can commend them on their attempts as trying itself is a form of change and worth celebrating. Then, therapists will work with the couple to identify any barriers that may have gotten in the way and strategies that may help overcome these barriers. Some couples may have been successful in making selected changes and have already experienced relationship gains. For those couples, therapists can have them describe the process in detail. If they have made similar attempts earlier but were unsuccessful, therapists should encourage them to think about anything they have done differently that may have led to a successful attempt this time around and highlight the connection to their DEEP understanding if there is any. If time allows, therapists can work with the couple to think about how they can make those changes more sustainable or continue to be successful in making other changes. It will also be helpful to prepare partners for possible failures by acknowledging the fact that most people find it difficult to make and maintain deliberate changes.



## SESSION 8

# Discussing Changes, Celebrating, and Tolerating Future Problems

The final session is the termination session. It has two primary goals – to celebrate what partners have accomplished during the treatment and prepare them for possible future challenges. We encourage therapists to start the session by reviewing with the couple whether and how their relationship satisfaction has changed as

reflected on the Weekly Questionnaire as well as specific changes they each made. For couples with improvements, therapists can highlight the positive experience by encouraging couples to reflect on things in their relationship that are now different. For those who did not improve, therapists can focus more on celebrating their courage to confront relationship problems and highlight the efforts each partner has put into the relationship reflecting how much they each value their relationship.

To prepare the couple for future problems, we encourage therapists to discuss with the couple important things to take away from the process. Specifically, therapists can review certain DEEP components that may be most useful for the couple to be mindful about, changes they've made that are most critical to maintain and any obstacles that are most likely to prevent them from maintaining those changes. It is also important to check in with the couple about the positive activities they picked, whether they've had the opportunity to do any of those activities, ways to make time for those activities, and if there are any other activities of interest. Lastly, as described above, the optional Strengthen phase of the program is made available for the couple for future relationship needs. Therapists can also make sure that the couple are aware of these additional resources they have access to in the OurRelationship program before they finish the treatment.



## Alternative Models for Integration

### Alternative Number of Sessions

This eight-session structure for integrating the OurRelationship program can be modified in a number of different ways. When eight sessions are not possible, we suggest first eliminating session 7, then session 5, then session 6. When more than eight sessions are available, we would recommend adding additional sessions following sessions 4 and 5 if the couple need more time to create a more nonjudgmental and objective view of their relationship to enable them to work more collaboratively on their relationship problems before assigning the Respond phase. Another place to consider adding additional sessions is after the couple completes the Respond phase to make sure that the couple has picked changes that are specific, feasible, and appropriate and/or to address any challenges they may have encountered when creating changes.

## Other Theoretical Orientations

The eight couple therapy sessions model described above is derived from IBCT – the same theoretical approach on which the OurRelationship program is based. However, IBCT has several similarities to Emotion Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) and Gottman Couple Therapy (Benson et al., 2012). Therefore, it may be possible for a therapist to modify our suggested course of IBCT therapy to be a more natural fit for these other approaches. For example, a therapist working within an Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT; Johnson, 2015) model of couple therapy would likely focus on attachment related sensitivities as part of the DEEP analysis and want to work with both partners to more fully uncover their unvoiced attachment needs and create softening moments to enhance their emotional intimacy (i.e., deepening engagement in EFT Steps 5 and 6). This later goal could potentially be accomplished by adding additional sessions between sessions 4 and 5 in the model above (before beginning the Respond phase). Therapists working under Gottman’s model of couple therapy (Gottman & Gottman, 2015) might expand the DEEP understanding to assess and provide feedback on meta-emotion mismatches (Goal 4 of the Gottman approach) and to construct a shared meaning system (Goal 5 of the Gottman approach).

## HIPPA and Privacy Considerations

The OurRelationship program is considered as a self-help program provided by an outside service – not by the therapist. The integration model presented here assumes that couples are always accessing the program on their own devices; therefore, the therapist never has direct access to any client-entered information on the OurRelationship program. As a result, we believe that therapists can have clients use the program as described here without concern that the use would jeopardize HIPAA privacy protections. That said, the OurRelationship program utilizes secure HTTPS connections and is professionally hosted in a Health Information Trust Alliance (HITRUST) Common Security Framework (CSF) hosting environment – which meets all HIPPA hosting requirements.