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Guidelines for Couples and Families

Unlike Individual Therapy where the boundaries between the therapist and the client are clear and direct, Couples Therapy and/or Family Therapy poses potential challenges and risks for both the therapist and the participants.

THERAPY GOALS

It is common for couples and families to present for therapy with “relationship goals” and/or “group goals.” Those common goals are often fueled by individual needs, desires, and expectations. It is important to remind you that everyone participating as a client in my practice is given the opportunity to state both group goals and individual goals from the very beginning Initial Intake appointment. There will be no one individual who has more voice or more power in the group (children/minors may not have the same power as their parents when it comes to making decisions about safety, housing, chores, and school, but their voices and viewpoints will carry equal importance in family therapy sessions). Understandably, therapy goals do change over time, and I will continually address and review therapeutic goals throughout our time together.

HIDDEN AGENDAS

Yes, it happens. On occasion, adults may try to use therapy as a way to address a hidden agenda. What is a hidden agenda? A hidden agenda is any expectation that is not discussed directly or openly with other couple or family participants. Sometimes, people are hesitant or fearful of sharing potentially upsetting information. They may withhold such information and indirectly try to share it throughout therapy – this is understandable but is potentially damaging.

Other hidden agendas may include blaming another family member who has a mental health diagnoses – these diagnoses get “accidentally” dropped like bombs in the middle of family/couple sessions. Used in this way, they are usually hurtful and disrespectful. I do not address or identify individuals by their mental health diagnosis, nor do I believe that all individual challenges are the cause of group distress. However, if I believe there is an individual pathology that needs to be addressed by a medical professional or a mental health professional, I will address it promptly and respectfully.

Additionally, I will not participate in “creating a record” against another family member. This is a form of destructive collusion. ***I do not record the intimate details of our sessions in your chart, nor do I record second hand information or allegations made about other individuals.*** I record progress made towards therapy goals, report on symptom relief, and report on any professional referrals given to you.

FIGHTING IN SESSION

Fighting in session is highly discouraged. Although it is helpful for me witness how you and your family members may “do your dance,” it is ultimately a waste of your therapeutic hour to argue and fight. I also believe it is unethical for me to allow you to use a therapeutic hour in this fashion (remember, you are paying me to help you NOT do this!!) My goal is always to help you reduce conflict in your relationships and help you learn to use new/different skills to regulate your emotions when triggered.

Constant interrupting and talking over the top of other family members (or therapist) will not be tolerated. You will be reminded kindly and offered immediate support in using a different skill. You may even need to step outside and calm yourself before re-entering the discussion. This is fine and we have a very lovely waiting room for you to use to cool down! Openly arguing or fighting in our waiting room, parking lot, etc. is of course, discouraged.

Insults and threats made by any participant will cause our session to come to an immediate close. This type of behavior rarely results in productive or helpful results, and I usually ask an individual (s) to control such behavior.

OUTSIDE OF THERAPY EXPECTATIONS

What goes on outside of my clinical practice is mostly out of my control! Meaning, some people talk about their sessions with their family members, some people don't. Some people quote their therapist in the middle of a fight ... I encourage you to **SPEAK FOR YOURSELF** and not **TRIANGULATE** your clinician! I do not want to be put in the position of a **PSEUDO-PARENT** or an **AUTHORITY FIGURE**. I would like to be your in-session guide and mentor. Ultimately, I try to help individuals speak directly and honestly for themselves, learning that they do not need "BACK UP" when discussing difficult issues with their family members! Keep in mind, most therapists quoted outside of session are **MIS-QUOTED!**

SECRETS

As family therapists, we cannot be expected to hold secrets from other adult family members. If something private is shared with me during an individual session, I cannot be asked to "keep it private" or deliberately withhold the information from another adult family member. If it is an issue of risk, safety, or highly sensitive material I will encourage (and assist) the adult participant to share it with their partner or spouse in a future couples session. I respectfully ask adults to honor the following therapy guidelines:

- _____ Do not send me confidential emails/texts with your unique "therapy updates" or additional private information
- _____ Do not send me confidential emails/texts with information about your spouse, partner, or family member
- _____ Do not forward me emails/texts/voicemails/videos that your adult partner or family member has sent you
- _____ Do not leave me voicemails with any "helpful information" about your family member
- _____ Do not use ANY electronic media to discuss your therapy, your partner's therapy, or the details of your family therapy (Twitter, Facebook, email, etc.)
- _____ DO ASK FOR MY ASSISTANCE if you are struggling with any of these situations

Name and Date of Participant

Therapist, Dawn Stremel, MA, LMFT (date)

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