

Rob Fisher

Experiential Psychotherapy with Couples: A Guide for the Creative Pragmatist

Robert M. Fisher, M. A., M.F.T.

Editor's Note: Rob Fisher's book *Experiential Psychotherapy With Couples – a Guide for the Creative Pragmatist* (Phoenix, Zeig/Tucker/Theisen, 2002) is both an excellent Hakomi training manual and a guide to working experientially and effectively with couples. We are happy and fortunate in this article to have Rob share excerpts from the book that lend themselves to hands on work in the field. This is congruent with Rob's expertise and training style of emphasizing concrete skills along with underlying principles. Permission for inclusion of these excerpts has been granted by the publisher.

Rob Fisher, M.A., M.F.T., is a psychotherapist, consultant and CAMFT certified supervisor in private practice in Mill Valley. He is a certified Hakomi Therapist and Trainer. He is an adjunct professor at JFK University where he teaches marriage and family therapy classes and case consultation seminars as well as an adjunct professor at California Institute of Integral Studies where he teaches Hakomi and Theories and Techniques of Body Oriented Psychotherapy. He also teaches couples therapy at the post graduate level at a variety of agencies in San Francisco and Marin country. He is the publisher of the *Couples Psychotherapy Newsletter* and the author of *Experiential Psychotherapy With Couples, A Guide for the Creative Pragmatist*. He has been a Master and Peer Presenter at the annual CAMFT Conference and at other national conferences such as the USABP. He is also a California State Licensed Continuing Education Provider. He can be contacted at *email: contactone@aol.com*

ABSTRACT: This article includes key excerpts from the book, *Experiential Psychotherapy with Couples – A Guide for the Creative Pragmatist* by Rob Fisher. The excerpts are designed to provide the underlying rationale for experiential psychotherapy and practical information on how to intervene in somatic and experiential ways that gently go to the heart of a couple's difficulties. The article is designed to be immediately applicable to actual practice and to provide new ideas and approaches that can make couples therapy deeper, briefer and more satisfying to all involved.

Introduction

The following article contains excerpts from the book entitled *Experiential Psychotherapy with Couple: A Guide for the Creative Pragmatist* by Rob Fisher. The book outlines how to apply Hakomi principles and techniques to psychotherapy with couples in very practical ways. It includes many case examples and proposed wording on how to lead couples deeply into their experience and away from standard fighting and disengagement. This approach, as the book makes clear in many places, is primarily based on the work of Ron Kurtz, the principal founder of Hakomi Experiential Psychotherapy. It represents one application and elaboration of Hakomi principles and methods, in addition to those of others who have further refined the approach in relation to other clinical populations.

The Rationale for An Experiential Approach

Think about it for a moment. Which would be more satisfying: discussing the chocolate cake you ate sometime during the last week, or sinking your teeth into a piece of

rich, moist, chocolate cake with swirls of butter cream frosting? Which would be more interesting: discussing the last time you had sex, or actually engaging in sexual activity with someone you love? Which would be more likely to change your life: watching National Geographic on television or taking a trip around the world?

There is obviously a world of difference between reporting about an experience and having one. There is also a significant difference between polite conversation and psychotherapy, yet much of contemporary therapy relies on the former, while neglecting the power and aliveness of direct experience. By taking therapy from the realm of second hand reports about events that have occurred in the lives of your clients to the realm of actual experience, you will increase your therapeutic power and depth exponentially. The book *Experiential Psychotherapy with Couples* and the excerpts in this article will show you how to move from the practice of couple's psychotherapy *in vitro* to couples therapy *in vivo*.

Here is an example of an experiential intervention based on an assessment of present time material in a session:

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Annie walked briskly into my office, followed reluctantly by her husband Jack. While he and I listened, she spoke quickly, outlining their many problems in quite some detail. Her pace was unrelenting. Her sentences had neither commas nor periods. After 20 minutes of her all out assault, she took a breath. I suspected this would be my only chance. I was struck not so much by the content of her soliloquy, but by her internal state which accompanied it, and the system between them that allowed her to talk in this fashion and him to listen in a burdened and overwhelmed state. She was desperately trying to get herself heard while driving away any possibility of this occurring. He was trying to preserve some sense of himself in a way that incited her to escalate her verbal barrage.

I said to her, "You feel really fast inside, huh?" She paused for a second, surprised that someone else was actually paying attention. "Yes", she said simply. "Lets try something", I continued. "I'll write something on a piece of paper and ask Jack to say this to you while you notice what happens inside -- feelings, memories, thoughts, images, impulses, memories, or nothing at all. Would that be O.K.?" "Yes", she said. I wrote something down and instructed Jack to say it to her when she indicated she was ready. Finally she looked up at Jack and he said, "Annie, I hear you and I see you." She wept. No more words. Finally she said, "I have been waiting our whole relationship for you to say that." Right now this may seem magical, but it is a simple intervention based on the principles and interventions you will assimilate from the following pages.

Understanding the causes of a problem is useful information, but few people have been released from the constraints of their personalities through interpretation alone. How many of us have heard a client say, "Well, it must be because my mother was intrusive", or "I think that is because my brother always got all the attention?" Interesting insights, no doubt, yet no change. There is a limit to the efficacy of the analytic process. It relies on our cognitive function (often a defense in itself) and neglects the wealth of information available through the other, more lively categories of experience. Psychotherapy that is organized around conversation simply misses the point. We did not develop psychological and emotional problems by engaging in polite conversation. We developed our character with all its strengths and limitations as the result of impactful experiences.

This is not a new idea. When Freud began analyzing transference, he was exploring an experiential event that was taking place in the therapy room between patient and therapist. Family therapists such as Virginia Satir built family sculptures to help clients bring into consciousness their relational dynamics in a visceral fashion. Minuchin would ask couples to reenact in his office a dispute that happened during the week, so that he would be better able to intervene effectively in live material. There have been

masters of tracking clients' experience such as Erickson, therapists who focused on the energetic flow in the body such as Reich and Lowen, and those who worshipped at the altar of current awareness like Perls. All of these, and others, have contributed to the development of experiential work in individual, couples and family therapy. Using their work as building blocks, the book and these pages will try to responsibly ground, broaden and deepen the possibilities for working experientially with couples.

Couples psychotherapy is an ideal environment to implement experiential interventions because actual interactions are taking place in your office. Your clients can, in vivo, explore the ways they are internally and externally organized around each other. In the safety of your office they can begin to experiment with new ways of relating to each other affectively, cognitively and behaviorally, not just by reporting and discussing, but also by face-to-face, real-life implementation. They can eat the chocolate cake and see the temples of Burma first hand.

Eating chocolate cake is of course very well and good," you say, yet you are reminded that you might get fat! Having sex can be very rewarding and intense you muse, but be careful because you do not want to end up with AIDS! And traveling around the world can change your whole perspective on life, yet you know how uncomfortable those inexpensive hotels are in Burma!

So we sit in our conformable chairs, one step removed. We have developed a sanitized, (if not devitalized) psychotherapy where we can hear about our clients' experiences second hand, apply our (not inconsequential) analytic abilities to their problems, and keep it all nicely at arms length.

This approach is as much about principles and techniques as it is about the state of being of the therapist. While strategically applying experiential methods can be dramatic and can stir the boiling cauldron of the psyche, these approaches are mechanical without the investment of the process with the actual humanness of the therapist. Your internal state of being and your willingness to participate in your clients' experiential world are critical factors in the implementation of what you are about to read. Technique without contact becomes mechanical and dry.

Do not be deluded into thinking that you are being neutral with your clients. They track you like a hawk - consciously or unconsciously. They notice the small changes in inflection, how you sit forward when they become emotional, your bored analytical tone when they talk about their week, the ring on you finger, the slump of your posture, your interest in their sex lives, the softness of your handshake, the pace of your words, your inclination to fix their problems, the rigidity with which you keep your face from showing emotion, etc. Madison Avenue has been aware of the power of these non-verbal signals for a long

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time. Sales of Cutty's Whisky increased 60% in 1961 when a picture of a nude woman was embedded in an ice cube in their advertisement. This image was supposedly "unobservable to the naked eye." The good news is that your ability to notice what is happening is much greater than you may think.

Working experientially with couples is not for the faint of heart. It demands that you be engaged with all of your humanity, not just your mental or analytic facility. It asks you to come out from behind the protection of your cloak of authority and proceed, hand in hand with your client into an adventure - the actual unfolding of the self. I invite you to join me in this journey, not to the far reaches of the external world, but to the wonder and beauty of the internal world of experience. Bon appetit, use condoms, sign your traveler's checks prior to leaving the bank. And always remember to take your humanity with you into your sessions!"

If you subscribe to the premise that working with live experience is more productive than normal conversation, the creative challenge then becomes, how to design and effectively use experiential interventions. The following section describes a number of such interventions.

Experiments

One of the cornerstones of this method is the deliberate evocation of experiences while the client is in a state of mindfulness. Once a theme is evident, the therapist can design an experiment that the couple or one of the partners can undertake to study more deeply each individual's internal organization or their organization as a couple. Conducting therapeutic experiments in mindfulness is one way to gather information about the couple's internal worlds, to explore how the two worlds intersect, and to deepen each individual's experience of himself or herself toward core organizing material.

An experiment is an experience intentionally set up by the therapist with the permission of the client(s) to evoke, study, and deepen the felt sense of organizing material. The purpose of an experiment is to bring into greater consciousness how a person is organized around a particular issue or conflict involving their partner.

Experiments are always conducted in mindfulness and are oriented toward present experience. They involve and invite tremendous creativity on the part of the therapist. Almost anything presented to a client in a mindful state could be called an experiment. It is most useful, however, to propose experiments that either help clients elucidate their present organization, or provide an opportunity to expand beyond the limitations internally imposed on the self or the couple.

For example, Leslie was angry at Richard because he "never did anything for her." I questioned whether she, in fact, asked him for the things she wanted. She replied,

"No," he should just pay attention to me and then he'd know." I thought it would be a good idea to study with this couple how they were organized around their respective needs. I placed a 3 x 5 card between them. "This is the TV remote control," I said. "Both of your favorite TV shows are on tonight. You guys decide who gets to watch his or her show." She instantly gave up.

We were able to explore in vivo what she said to herself inside that allowed her to do this: "I can wait. My needs aren't really so important. My role as a wife is to make him happy. Fuck him!" was the approximate sequence.

This was an experiment designed to study the present organization of the couple around giving and taking in the relationship. We could have explored his side of this as well, but he indicated that he would be relieved if she spoke up more for herself and so became less resentful. He also admitted that he could become a bit self-absorbed and was willing to work on this.

So we proceeded to construct another experiment in which she tried something different. I knew she had once trained to be on a debating team. We called forth the debater in her and had her practice standing up for her needs. I told her a story about a child who readily stood up for his desires to watch his television program (my son!). I asked her again to be mindful, as she tried on this new role, for what might come up internally either to support or to oppose her new way of being. She held on to the 3 x 5 card tightly this time. This gave us more of an opportunity to explore the forces counter to her asking for what she needed, and for her to have a real life experience of standing up for herself while also being supported by her husband.

We checked in with him, and it was evident that he liked her spirit, even though in the short run it would appear to make life a bit harder for him, and would require more compromise on his part.

Experiments take both the client and the therapist into the unknown. They are exercises that involve one's ability to conceptualize thematic material and design appropriate and edifying experiences around those themes. They require the therapist not to be an authority on the inside worlds of clients, but to be an expert on leading them deeply into their own experience.

As always, experiments should only be undertaken once safety and the therapeutic container are well established. This can take minutes to weeks, depending on the couple. Verbal experiments, supporting defenses, and other forms of deepening already described are all forms of experiments. Anything conducted in mindfulness that helps a client deepen his or her felt sense of his or her own organization can be classified as an experiment. Numerous forms of experiments will be described below.

How to Set Up Experiments

After attending to safety, the therapist should propose an experiment to the couple or individual, making sure that permission to carry it out and cooperation are obtained. You might say, "Let's try this . . .," or "I have something in mind that might help us explore this further. How about . . ." or "Would you like to find out more about how that's put together?"

Explain what you have in mind, ask the client or clients to become mindful, and then engage in the experiment itself. You might say, "Study what happens when . . .," or "Notice what goes on inside when . . ." Make sure to proceed slowly and to allow the client to luxuriate in every phase of the experience.

Remember to track the client's internal experience from the moment you propose the experiment, and also what they say both verbally and nonverbally about it. A compliant client will say that it is all right to proceed even if it is not. Therefore, it is up to you to notice any hesitation or reluctance in the person's voice or body movements, tension, and so on, and not to proceed until these are explored.

The exploration of the reluctance may well be more important than the original experiment you had in mind. If, after exploring the reluctance, the partners are still hesitant to proceed, do not continue to push your agenda, however creative and brilliant it may be. Always adjust to their interest and willingness.

Often a client will perform the experiment internally as soon as you propose it. This is a way of testing the waters internally before doing it externally. Track and contact what comes up for each person, even if he or she starts the experiment before you are ready. Once the experiment is in progress, continue to track carefully and to obtain verbal reports about what is happening. Contact the client's ongoing experience and apply other accessing techniques, such as the Three Step, to help deepen and unfold the experience further.

If clients are not interested in an experiment, or you engage in one that does not spontaneously deepen, feel free to abandon it. It is all right to admit that you may not be on the right track. You can say, "So that does not seem to go anywhere. Let's try something else."

Feel free to use information from the client to refine an experiment by asking what might work better for that person. You are not required to come up with experiments all by yourself, with the client participating in a passive, less empowered role. Generating experiments conjointly helps equalize the power imbalance that often exists between a client and a therapist and engages the client as a real participant in the therapy.

Experiments that fail often have one of the following characteristics: (1) they have been set up without first establishing safety, (2) the therapist proceeds too quickly, (3) the client's interest is not sufficiently engaged, (4) the client is not in a state of mindfulness, or (5) one or both partners are characterologically predisposed to resist whatever you propose, or to stay away from their inner experiences. Check to see which of these conditions exists and take steps to correct it.

Once the experiment is introduced, permission is granted, and mindfulness is established, the experiment can be undertaken. The therapist then tracks the experiences that are evoked by the experiment, and the clients report what happens inside. Whatever comes up as a result of the experiment is then material for further deepening, even if it appears to be unrelated to the original experiment. As in all deepening, find ways to immerse the client in the felt sense of experience and continue to study particular aspects of it as it unfolds.

Types of Experiments

Anything can be used as an experiment as long as it is nonviolent, performed in mindfulness, focuses on present experience, the therapist tracks the ongoing results, and obtains a report from the clients afterward. Experiments can be derived from anything you track, such as gestures, pace, inflection, beliefs, methods of self protection, posture, feelings, and tensions. Here are some examples of what is possible. This list is not exhaustive. The possibilities are limited only by your own creativity and imagination (and appropriate boundaries, of course). Feel free to borrow from other disciplines such as art, dance, drama, sand tray, and rituals, as well as other theoretical orientations.

Mindfulness

One of the easiest and most profound tools of experiential work is slowing a couple down enough so that they can sense underneath the blaming the unconscious ways in which each person is organized around the other's upset. This is accomplished by asking the couple to repeat a tiny segment of an interactional sequence in mindfulness and to study and report their experience.

Mindfulness involves carefully and non-judgmentally studying one's internal moment-to-moment experience. It means welcoming whatever comes and noticing the subtleties of one's feelings, thoughts, beliefs, memories, images, changes in physiology, breathing and muscle tension that occur at any given moment. Mindfulness is oriented completely towards the present.

Here is an example of using mindfulness to explore a couple's dynamics. *Peter complains that Sally is always involved with someone or something else. As he talks, she*

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looks around the room and he becomes increasingly upset as he talks. I might ask them both to close their eyes and go inside. When they are ready, Peter is invited to open his eyes and watch in mindfulness as Sally opens her eyes and looks around the room. Because this is performed in mindfulness and in a homeopathic dose, he will probably be able to notice feelings and beliefs that were previously unconscious.

In an ordinary quarrel, he would be going so fast that he would not be able to sense the real nature of the injury that her looking around triggers inside him. In fact, he would tend to act out, desperately trying to make the feeling go away by blaming Sally. This takes the attention off him and gives him some sense of validity by proving that she is wrong. In mindfulness, he can begin to turn his attention toward his inner world and therapy can begin.

Sally, too, can study the impulse to look around. To accomplish this, she can be asked to look around and be inwardly mindful of the feelings, memories, images, and so on, that arise as she does this. She can also restrain herself from doing it, not as a behavioral prescription, but as an opportunity to study the internal effect of the restraint.

Proprioceptive Signals

We all have inner sensations that determine our outward behavior. Experiments can be devised that orient clients toward their worlds of proprioception. For instance, the therapist can ask partners to sit some distance apart, and then study what happens with their bodies and in the other realms of internal experience as they slowly begin to move closer to each other.

Boundaries

If a couple is struggling with issues around boundaries, experiments can be constructed to bring their process into greater awareness. Physical boundaries can be constructed in the room with chalk lines, pillows, blankets, or other materials.³ These boundaries can be made more or less permeable as each partner studies how the changes affect him or her, as well as the sensations, beliefs, memories, images, and other experiences that are evoked as this is done.

One couple was triangulated with the husband's mother. She called frequently to find out how they were doing and always made sure to say something of a poisonous nature to her only son about his new bride. The wife was incensed that he engaged in these conversations in which she was vilified.

As an exercise, I asked them to sit on the floor and for him to draw a chalk circle around both of them that symbolized a boundary around their relationship. We put a teddy bear that symbolized his mother on the outside of the circle.

They then studied what came up internally as they took in the boundary around their relationship excluding his mother.

He spoke about his sense of loyalty to his family, as well as his mother's intrusiveness in all of his relationships. His wife reported feeling relief and the ability to soften when she felt the security of the boundary. He liked the effect the circle had on his wife, so we practiced having him keep his mother out in appropriate and compassionate ways. Without suggesting it to him, he then went home, called his mother, and announced that he was no longer going to discuss his marital relationship with her. She initially was very upset at this change in the rules, but gradually adjusted.

Working with Defenses

Much of the difficulty in couple's relationships stems from the interaction of one person's defenses with the other's. When one person moves into a protective stance, this can be explored both internally and in relationship to their partner.

For instance, if Steve becomes cold and aloof when he is in danger of being hurt, he can be asked to do this on purpose in the session while he studies the intricacies of how he does it, and Mary Jane studies the effect of this on her. He might notice that he squints his eyes, contains his physical movement and verbal flow, and withdraws his energy deep within his body. When she studies the effect of this on herself in mindfulness, she may connect it to the desolation she felt when her father did something similar, and she might experience the protective rage that still arises to keep her from the deep despair she felt with him. We could then let her have her rage in a "homeopathic" dose — one or two sentences — to explore the effect it has on Steve, as well as to become even clearer on how it protects her from the underlying hurt.

Inexperienced psychotherapists tend to oppose their client's defensive systems rather than help them identify, appreciate, and re-own the wisdom of the defense. When this happens, one of the only honorable things the client can do is resist the therapist, who then classifies the client as resistant.

Another approach to defenses is to support them. By doing this, the defensive system relaxes, feels sympathized with, and the feelings it is designed to protect begin to surface naturally, without being forced. It is in this way that the therapist begins to gain the cooperation of the client's unconscious.

This approach is different from paradoxical intention in that it is not a covert activity on the part of the therapist. Supporting a defense is always done with the permission of the client for the express purpose of studying the defense, providing therapeutic safety, and allowing information and feelings to surface from a deeper level.

Psychological defenses are always somatically represented. In working somatically, one looks for somatic components of the defensive system and offers to have the spouse assist with this.

For instance, Jake complained that he had to do everything and that Sally was never there for him. This reflected certain beliefs he had about the availability of emotional nourishment and his ability to take it in.

As he spoke, I noticed that he held his head rigidly in a military fashion. I asked him if it would be O.K. if Sally helped him hold his head up high. He said "Yes." As she gently took the weight of his head, that he had had to hold up by himself since his father taught him to be a "little man," he noticed how hard it was for him to let go of this control. Beliefs such as "No one will ever be here for me," started to become apparent. He could hear internally his father's injunction: "Be strong and don't depend on anyone." Finally he started to let Sally take the weight of his head and began to experience the sadness of his early abandonment, which had influenced every subsequent relationship.

Jake was defended against dependency. The somatic representation of his defense was the way he literally tried to hold his head up high. By helping him hold his head up, his body and defenses began to relax, and he began to see the possibility of receiving emotional nourishment from his wife.

Gesture, Posture, Tensions

By now, it should be fairly obvious that a tremendous amount can be learned about a couple's partners by noticing their postures, gestures, and tensions, individually and in relation to each other. Here are some more specific samples of each type of intervention:

In the case of a couple afraid of intimacy, one way to work with gestures is to have one partner reach out to touch the heart area of the other while they both study the internal effects of this action, as well as what the hand seems to be saying to the heart.

Here are two examples. Carl would become very upset with Mary. When he did, he fell into a private world of darkness and did not look at his wife. We tried an experiment in which he adjusted his gaze to include her. We noticed that when he made visual contact with her, his image of her as a cruel and dangerous woman immediately diminished.

When Jessica and Dan came to the office and sat down, the most obvious thing about them was the difference in the tension in their ankles. Dan's were more relaxed than seemed humanly possible, while Jessica maintained a high level of tension, wiggling her foot constantly.

One could speculate from this about the kind of conflicts they had around time, money, and agreements. When these differences were pointed out and discussed with them, they began to relax. In the next session, she commented that she no longer felt so compelled to make him be like her.

As an alternative intervention, I could have also had each one try to make the other's ankle like his or her own (which would have mirrored their psychological processes), or I could have asked him to take over the tension in her ankle so that she would not have to do it all by herself.

Couples' Sculptures

"A picture is worth a thousand words." A couples' sculpture is worth at least 10,000. Particularly for couples who are highly verbal and cannot stop long enough to notice what they are actually doing, having them produce a sculpture of their relationship dynamics is a very useful strategy.

A version of this technique was used by Virginia Satir in family therapy. She would tell people to assume positions that reflected their psychodynamic positions in the family. For instance, a blamer would be directed to point a finger toward the placater, who would kneel in front of the blamer and plead for forgiveness.

In this version of the technique, the couple comes up with the sculpture themselves from the inside instead of the therapist's prescribing it. Particularly for highly verbal couples, this is an effective way to deepen therapy and can reveal material that is not so readily available in the well-trodden paths of verbal interactions.

The technique works as follows: Ask the couple to stop whatever they are doing and notice the psychological stance that they are taking with their partner. Ask them to imagine what a physical sculpture would look like that personifies this dynamic. Each will probably come up with something different. Then ask one of them silently to direct himself or herself and his or her partner into this precise position with regard to each other — and hold it for a minute, noticing how it feels in their bodies, as well as any memories and images, feelings, or tensions it calls up.

After a while, ask for a report from each person. From here, you can continue to explore in a variety of ways. The partners may exaggerate certain aspects of their sculptures, or diminish them. They can look for associations about their stances. One partner can modify a part of his or her stance and the other person can notice internally how he or she is affected. Finally, it is usually best to have one partner recreate the sculpture to fit his or her ideal, prior to continuing with the other person's sculpture (if there is time in the session for this). At this point, it is also very important for the partners to search for any part of themselves that resists this ideal sculpture.

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For example, a turning point came in therapy with Howard and Susan when they played out his sculpture. He placed himself in a corner of the room, with her reaching out toward him as he beckoned with one hand and held her off with the other. He was able to study each part of his internal conflict about intimacy as he explored the feelings and meanings connected with each hand. We were able to experiment with what it would be like if only one hand were operative, and, in particular, what it was like as he let her in more, breaking the trance of the transference and beginning to experience her as his wife rather than as his intrusive stepmother.

Breaking the Trance of the Transference

We are all familiar with the way in which emotionally laden images from the past form an overlay on present-time experience. When transference occurs, one's partner seems to take on an uncanny resemblance to the emotional characteristics of earlier intimates. Part of the challenge of couples therapy is to break the trance of the past. What follows is an example of a technique that although controversial, may be useful in achieving this result.⁴

As a child, Debby had been molested by her father. When her husband, John, reached out to touch her in a way that could be construed as even a mild sexual advance, she immediately was overcome by fear and revulsion. John, of course, had interlocking issues about his masculinity and rejection, which were easily triggered by Debby's sexual withdrawal.

In the middle phase of therapy, we tried an experiment designed to break the automatic transference association between John and Debby's father. Although she was able to tell them apart intellectually, on an emotional level, they merged, and the image of her father was superimposed on John, making a sexual relationship impossible. After fully describing the experiment and asking both for their permission, I asked Debby to go inside, check into her inner experience, and let John know when she was ready by opening her eyes. I asked him to start reaching out his hand toward her arm (a spot she had designated as "safe.") He did this in slow motion as she tracked her experience to the point where the fear and revulsion began to appear. This was the somatic point at which the transference occurred.

At this juncture, rather than deeply exploring those feelings (which would be more appropriate in an individual session), I asked him to say to her: "Debby, I am John, your husband. I am not your father. I love you, I do not want to hurt you, and you can say 'No' to me whenever you need to." She took this in, and her feelings calmed down.

We tried this three times before it was possible for him actually to touch her arm without triggering her old response. They were then able to apply this successfully to

their sexual relationship outside of the session. He also had more sympathy for her conflict and pain, and personalized her sexual rejection to a much lesser degree as a result of this experiment.

Poetry

Poetry can affect people deeply. I have a file full of poems on my desk. Sometimes a poem will speak directly to a client's situation or quandary and I will read it to the client while he or she is mindful of what it evokes.

I read a poem about seeing the best in people to a client who was studying to be a career counselor, and who felt a deep dedication to evoking the best. She cried deeply and concluded the session saying, "Now I am clear about what I want to offer." The poem met her in a place of deep dedication.

Telling a Story

Storytelling is a time-honored traditional way to communicate wisdom. It often accesses material below the conscious mind. Sometimes people hear stories through the filter of childlike states that are more malleable than adult states. In the structure of experiments, one first asks the client to be mindful, then tells the story, tracks the effect, and gets a report.

I once told a story I had seen on television a week earlier to a man who organized himself around the needs of his girlfriend, losing all sense of himself in the process. In the story, a divorced couple in Japan found themselves about to compete for the national chess championship. The ex-husband called his ex-wife on the phone and said, "Do you know we are competing for the national championship next Wednesday?" "Yes," she replied. He responded, "Do not let yourself lose to me." "I will not," she replied, rather formally. He continued, "I will not let you defeat me!"

In the story, she went on to beat him. My client listened quietly. After a long silence, and with tears streaming down his cheeks, he said, "That cuts right to the bone." It was a model of the kind of relationship that he hoped for, but never let him self have.

Scripting a Line for a Couple

In a behavioral fashion, the therapist can script a line for one or both members of the couple and then ask them to say it while maintaining mindfulness.

For instance, if partners do not listen to each other, the therapist could ask one person to say, "I hear your feelings," and explore the result for both the speaker and the listener.

Taking Over Some Aspect of the Client's Experience

In one session Hillary cried while George comforted her, saying, "That's all right, you don't have to cry." She stopped crying and looked at him resentfully. "Why can't you ever hear me?" she asked.

We could have explored her injuries about not being heard, but I elected instead to focus on her question. I asked him what happened inside him when he listened to her crying. He said, "I feel like I need to make her feel better." I said, "You feel responsible for her, huh?" "Yeah," he said.

I inserted a little story I had heard on the radio about Frank Sinatra. He was asked in an interview what women really want. He answered, "They just want a soft shoulder to cry on." This man was from the Frank Sinatra generation, so I proposed that I would be responsible for alleviating her distress for the rest of the session and he could just sit back and listen to her feelings and enjoy how open and available she was making herself to him. He agreed. She cried, while he appreciated the gift of her tears. I kept checking in, letting him know I was being responsible so that he wouldn't have to be. She had the experience of being heard in the way she wanted, and he was relieved of the burden of responsibility.

This provided the couple with a reference point that could guide them in future interactions involving her emotional world. I had simply taken over an aspect of his inner functioning (his over-responsibility for her feeling) so that he was free to experience something different.

Symbolic Representations

If the partners are discussing a person who is absent from the room, such as a mother-in-law or an ex-lover, they can be asked to select an object that symbolically represents this person and to place it at an appropriate distance from them. Experiments can be generated in which the person is moved closer or farther away, or in which either person interacts with the symbol. Your clients can study how they organize in relationship to the symbol of this other person.

For instance, if one partner feels drawn toward a spiritual practice that excludes the other, he or she can select an item that stands for the practice. I have many small figures for my sand tray that are useful for this kind of experiment. They might choose a statuette of Buddha, for instance, and set it at the correct distance from them in the room. As they turn toward the statue, they each can become aware of its presence in the relationship and how it affects their connection.

This kind of experiment provides a physical representation of a psychological event. Its purpose is to clarify, deepen,

and intensify the couple's experience so that it can be more effectively explored.

Revising the Past

If a feeling comes up in a session that is reminiscent of a feeling from the past, it can be treated accordingly. The person can be asked to remember a time early in life when he or she had a similar feeling, and to describe the events that surrounded it. Following this description, the scene can be reenacted in order to create a better outcome.

For example, a woman often felt abandoned by her husband. When I asked her if this was a familiar feeling, she recalled an incident from the past in which her older, married brother had returned home one weekend with only a single ticket for the circus — which he gave to her sister. Grief stricken, my client shut herself in her room all afternoon while the rest of her family went on about their business and her sister enjoyed Barnum and Bailey. Nobody consoled her or talked with her about her upset. No one represented her side in the interaction with her brother.

When we reenacted the scene, I played her brother while her husband played her mother. I offered the ticket to her sister, while the mother (husband) stood up for her and told me that that was unacceptable. Ultimately, we reenacted the scene in several different ways. One time, the sister refused the ticket, and another time the mother came in and consoled her while she was crying.

All of this helped her husband to understand her sensitivity around this issue and gave the wife some experience of people coming through for her in ways she had not experienced as a child. As a by-product of the reenactment, the tender moments left the partners feeling closer together.

Using Touch

James reported a recent fight he had had with Amy. As he talked, he still looked hurt about some of the things she had said to him. I contacted the feeling, "You still feel a little hurt, huh?" He said, "Yes."

He knew that Amy had not intended to hurt him, but viscerally he couldn't shake the feeling and he was still inclined to be withdrawn. I asked him where in his body the hurt lived. He pointed to the center of his chest. I then asked his permission to allow Amy to touch his chest where the feeling was centered. He agreed.

As she began to reach toward him, he began to cringe. I contacted this. He experienced her reach as hostile. It felt to him as though she wanted to take something from him, trying to force him out of his protective withdrawal.

I asked him if it would be all right for her to feel compassionate toward this hurt place from afar, without

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reaching out toward him. He said that he thought that would feel good. We tried it out. She enjoyed feeling her own heart in relation to him. He enjoyed the compassion without feeling obliged to come out before he was ready. They felt closer and this became a reference point for a new way of relating to each other.

Obviously, one person reaching toward another is a powerful stimulus for internal experience. It can be experienced as nourishing, invasive, obligatory, pleading, grasping, or nourishing, according to the recipient's prior experiences and organization. Reaching out can be used in and of itself as an experiment that clarifies much of a couple's organization around closeness and intimacy.

Always proceed slowly with touch. Track the touchee and stop the experiment if the person seems to be feeling a boundary violation of any sort.

Using the Voice

Clients can be encouraged to try out new behaviors in session on an experimental basis. For someone with a soft voice for instance, an experiment can be set up in which he or she speaks either louder or softer to his or her partner. If the client has trouble setting limits, he or she can be given a line to speak such as "Cut it out," or "I don't like that." The person can experiment with trying to speak with more authority, kindness, or vulnerability, and notice what this calls up internally, as well as systemically with the partner. He or she can try speaking even softer in order to explore the function of this.

The quality of the voice often tells the partner more than does the content of a discussion. Experiments using the voice can be very enlightening for a couple.

Experiments at the Edge

All of us have psychological places that we have been trained to avoid. We may have learned to stay away from our sexuality, anger, affection, vulnerability, impulsiveness, power, dependency, and so on. Experiments can be constructed in which the client tentatively can embody one of these traits with the partner.

For instance, one couple that was conflict-avoidant spent many sessions just experimenting with telling each other what they wanted instead of avoiding controversy by suppressing their needs. The difference between this kind of intervention and a behavioral approach is that the purpose here is not just to practice new behavior, but also to explore in mindfulness how the client organizes around this change. In the case of this couple, they initially had to face their fears of conflict, and many memories of prior abusive relationships surfaced before they were willing to try something new.

In another situation, a couple had become embroiled in a repetitive, self-reinforcing cycle of ill will. Because she was so warrior-like with him, he would not support and protect her in the way she wanted. Consequently, she became harder and less vulnerable and loving. This, in turn, resulted in his pulling further away from her. Each person's attempts to protect himself or herself only resulted in further alienating the other.

Because the situation was so homeostatic and so prone to unconscious repetition, I thought that essentially they had to jump-start a new pattern. I asked them to have a conversation with their hands. His hands were to say, "I will protect you." Hers were to say, "I'll show you my soft side." No words, just touch. I asked them if they would be willing to do this, and they consented.

This began to give them the beginning of an experience that could be self-reinforcing in a positive fashion. They both reported that it was difficult to start because they were so habituated to their defensive stance, but that they were more satisfied at the effect of the new approach. They left the session with more than just a mental idea of a new relationship. They had begun actually to taste it.

Acknowledging

Many couples come to therapy feeling chronically under-acknowledged by their partners. Instead of only exploring the difficult feelings this has generated, the partners can experiment in session with appreciating each other. The experiences that come up around receiving positive strokes, as well as giving strokes, should be explored.

Close/Far

Issues around distance and closeness are commonplace. Complaints that one partner is too distant or too intrusive are familiar features of couples' conflicts. The underlying psychological issues can be explored by asking the partners physically to change the distance between them and mindfully notice what gets evoked in them.

Experiments at the Nourishment Barrier

People often find it difficult to take in nourishment. They refuse emotional nourishment because they may feel obligated to return it, they can feel trapped by it, the nourishment may feel toxic, or they may be worried that it is so transitory that they must save themselves from disappointment by not accepting it in the first place. Consequently, instead of noticing how they refuse nourishment, they complain that their partners are unwilling or unable to support them.

Although a partner's reluctance to offer nourishment may also be an issue, it is useful to study the refusal to receive.

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In this kind of experiment, a small dose of nourishment can be offered while the recipient studies how he or she can or cannot receive it.

For instance, Jack complained that Katie would consistently act like the boss after she came home from her high-powered, high-paying job in the city. He wanted her to be softer and tenderer toward him.

I asked her if she would be willing to try this out and see what happened. I added that I doubted whether either would die from this experiment. I asked her to see what happened if she allowed herself to look at him with softer eyes.⁵

He noticed, while she was doing this, how unprepared he was to allow himself to soften toward her. A little voice inside said, "As soon as you leave the session, she will be the boss again. Don't open yourself up to this. You'd be a fool."

In addition to the internal issues that drove her toward hardness, his organization around her softness served to discourage her from embodying it more and maintained the homeostasis of the system they had conjointly developed.

Bite Sizing

As discussed above, sometimes it is difficult to take in nourishment. However, if it is presented in sufficiently small portions, it may be easier to accept it. Often, toward the end of a session, in order to help a couple leave with some sense of hope and progress, I will ask them to give each other a tiny bit of nourishment that has been missing in the relationship.

For instance, if one person feels under-acknowledged, I will ask the partner to provide a simple acknowledgment. The recipient can see what it is like to take it in and the acknowledger can see what is required inside to give this kind of nourishment to his or her spouse. If someone has trouble in accessing a specific kind of nourishment, and this barrier has been explored, an experiment can be arranged for the person to receive just a little of what is wanted.

For example, if one partner has difficulty receiving compliments from the other, we would explore this in vivo by having the giving partner offer a compliment to the other. Embarrassment, not liking the attention, religious training around humility, and/or lack of entitlement may all surface. Finally, I might say, "O.K., now, despite all the parts of you that are reluctant to take in compliments, let's see if you can just let yourself take in a tiny fraction of one compliment. Let's have your husband/wife/partner say the compliment one more time, and you can see how much of it you can absorb."

Experiments with the Senses

One partner can explore the effect of not seeing or not hearing the other. One woman felt unsafe in revealing her feelings while her husband watched, so she erected a wall of pillows that prevented him from seeing her cry. It was all right for her to be heard, but not to be seen. A man felt more comfortable talking to his wife when she plugged her ears. Although this might sound humorous, it enabled him to get in touch with the incapacitating fear of her judgment that stopped him from getting close to her.

Exaggeration or Inhibition

In order to become clearer on any aspect of a couple's organization, either partner can be asked to exaggerate or inhibit a relevant behavior.

For instance, Paul could be asked to mindfully withdraw more rather than to come out, and to become aware of the details of this process as it affects his partner and himself.

Repetition in Slow Motion

Couples interact so quickly that it is hard to notice the internal dynamics beneath the external behavior. When an interaction is slowed down and repeated in mindfulness, previously unconscious internal material comes into awareness. The therapist can highlight any interactional sequence and ask the couple to repeat it slowly in mindfulness. One person can be asked to repeat a phrase they have just used, such as, "I'm really disappointed in you," or an action such as a hardening of the eyes.

These are the simplest of experiments, and yet they introduce the couple to the world of mindfulness. They help the couple develop a "relationship observing ego," and assist in short-circuiting the process of acting out, while providing deeper information about their intrapsychic and interactional issues.

Pace

Often, a couple's conflicts are connected to differences in pace. One person might think, speak, walk, decide, or move more quickly than the other. The slower person chronically feels pushed and eventually begins to resist the partner. The faster person feels frustrated and tends to push his or her partner.

Experiments with a couple like this may include having one person talk or move faster or slower and then studying in mindfulness the effect on each person internally, as well the effect on the system.

Verbal Experiments and Supporting the Defenses

Supporting defenses is discussed more fully in the book chapter on working with defenses and resistance. In this technique, the therapist or the partner can do something for the client that he or she habitually does for himself or herself.

I saw one couple mentioned earlier in which the woman, Ruth, had turned away from sex. I asked the couple to become mindful and carefully notice what happened inside when I said to them, "It's O.K. to have sex with each other."

I was looking for what in them would resist this. Ruth heard an internal voice saying, "No it isn't." When I asked her more about the quality of the voice, it became clear that it was the internalized voice of the Lutheran minister of her childhood. I asked her to train me in the exact tone, volume, rhythm, and emotional content of this voice as she heard it inside. Next, I asked her husband to say, "It's O.K. to have sex with me," while I took over the minister's voice. Taking over the minister's voice enabled her to obtain a different perspective on this inhibition and to begin to rebel against it instead of introjecting it.

Puppets

Puppets are very versatile and can be used in many therapeutic situations. They can often express what a client cannot. They can relieve clients of having to carry specific burdens in a relationship.

One couple would have the same fight each session. To relieve them of this burden, I asked two of my teddy bears to carry on the fight for them while the human couple watched to see what they could learn about themselves.

This is a way of evoking a couple's observing ego, as well as of placing them outside of a self-reinforcing system. Puppets can also be used if a person is being very defended. The therapist can ask a puppet to represent a more vulnerable part of this person and see what it has to say about the situation. A couple might be asked to put on a puppet show that exemplifies the conflict they are having. After they play it out, they can be asked to create a new and more satisfactory ending. This calls on their creative resources for resolution.

Art

Art is a highly evocative medium. People can draw pictures of disowned or triggered parts that affect the relationship and present the drawings to each other. Art projects can provide a little distance from the sense of injury and need for self-protection in which people become ensnared.

A therapist can ask the couple to draw an impressionistic genogram in which they use colors and whatever shapes they wish to capture each family member. The genogram should include the client's spatial position on the paper in relation to other family members. It should be filled in with color and patterns that exemplify each member's role and emotional impact on the family. These genograms can then be shared with each other and may give rise to further experiments.

The couple can also draw a picture of the stuck place they enter together, or simply draw themselves in the relationship. This eliminates programmed verbal interactions and helps them to see beyond the bickering. How they draw together is also diagnostic, and should be carefully tracked.

Physicalizing

One powerful tool in therapy is to develop a physical representation of a psychological dynamic. This helps to clarify the dynamic and evokes deeper information from the body.

One couple I saw was stuck in a pattern in which she would try to get her boyfriend to move forward on such issues as marriage or children, and he would resist. I proposed that we physicalize it by having them stand up while she took his hand and led him around the room while he resisted. They started to do this and immediately stopped and laughed. "This is how we take walks!" they said.

How they walked together was emblematic of this core pattern in their relationship. Once the dynamic is physicalized, each person's part can be explored, as well as how these parts work together systemically. In this case, they studied her inclination to pull him, his inclination to resist, and how these two tended to exacerbate each other. Following this, they could begin to create a new way of "walking together."

Reverse Arguing

The therapist can, consciously and with full permission from the client, engage one partner or the other in an argument in which the therapist represents a side of the matter that the client habitually takes, while the client must take the opposite point of view.

For instance, after three years and much processing about an affair, Monica still was angrily refusing to be open to Dylan. She said that it wasn't worth it, that he would just deceive her again, and that he didn't fit her picture of the perfect male anyway. But she stayed in the relationship.

The therapist asked her permission to be her and take over her arguments while she argued against her position. Having someone represent her usual arguments gave her

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the freedom to explore the other side in a fashion that was more powerful than trying to convince her to let go of her normal position. This must always be done with the client's permission.

Doing It on Purpose

When Sam feels stagnant in his life, Marny becomes critical of him and lets him know how his state of psychological and spiritual evolution is similar to that of a banana slug. Sam then defends himself and attacks a part of Marny's character.

A therapeutic intervention might be for Sam to be stagnant on purpose and for Marny to study inside the effect this has on her.

Space

Partners may sit quite close or quite far from each other. The physical distance they maintain can be diagnostically important.

Ally practically sat on top of Sean. They held hands and spoke sweetly to each other. A possible experiment would be to ask them to move a bit closer or a bit further apart.

Becoming a Disowned Part of the Partner

Sometimes arguments are caused by one partner's projecting a part of himself or herself onto the other, and then criticizing the partner for it.

A man who was trained as a young boy always to be competent and in control would criticize his girlfriend for acting like "a lost little girl." The challenge here is not necessarily to release his girlfriend from being dependent, but to explore how he had become imprisoned in the role of competence and unable to leave room for his more vulnerable parts. Systemically, his reluctance to be dependent pressured her to embody both his and her own dependency.

By asking him to act like a lost little child for a moment, and to notice what comes up, he could become conscious of his

beliefs, and the models of the world and masculinity that forced him to become a superman rather than a full human being.

Conclusion

This sampling of experiential and somatic interventions provides a number of possibilities that can be used where appropriate. Feel free to add to the list from your own creativity and connection with your clients.

Being able to implement them requires a number of important therapeutic skills. These include the ability to join with clients around their present time experience, the ability to track what is happening in each person's experience moment to moment, the ability to notice and name repetitive interactional patterns, the ability to notice and work with individual characterological issues and their interaction with their partner's, being able to deepen the experiential flow towards core material, a dedication to non-violence in the therapeutic relationship as well as a number of other important internal and interactional skills. It is highly recommended that therapists interested in these interventions make certain that they also develop and hone these skills.

By using the body and present time experience, therapy takes on a visceral quality that transcends the cognitive. By staying with live experience clients are able to more deeply and easily access core material. They have a sense of connection with themselves and their internal worlds that begins to permit them to reorganize how they participate in intimate relationships.

(For more information or to order the book, please contact the web address below:
<http://www.members.aol.com/contactone/experientialpsychotherapy.htm>)

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2. I learned this kind of work with boundaries in part from training in Integrative Body Psychotherapy.
 3. I am indebted to Devi Records for this approach.
 4. A technique proposed by Frances Verrinder, MFT. (personal communication).