Couple Therapy
for People with
Intellectual
Disabilities:
A Positive
Treatment Model!

J. Dale Munro
MSW, RSW, FAAIDD
Regional Support
Associates
London, Ontario, Canada
dmunro@wgh.on.ca

5 Target Audiences
- Front-line professionals
- Managers & supervisors
- Clinicians/Family therapists
- Family members
- Couples
BELIEFS

- Love + work ➔ cornerstone of happiness
- Romantics
- Not easy!!!
- Hygiene, etiquette & clothing…. 
- A Spark!!!
- “The true test…”
- Exciting/Frustrating
- Can teach valuable lessons!

Teenagers/Adults with Intellectual Disabilities

- Often dream about:
  ➔ Finding love
  ➔ Moving in together
  ➔ Getting married
  ➔ Having children
**Historically Resistance to People with I.D. Becoming Companions, Living Together or Marrying**

- Fears about procreating/“contaminating the gene pool”.
- Legal restrictions on marriage.
- Eugenic laws (1890-1920) led to forced sterilizations.
- Institutional admissions to keep genders apart.
- *BUT IN THE 1960s, ATTITUDES STARTED TO CHANGE!*  

**President Kennedy’s Task Force**

- Sexual Revolution of 1960s ➔ b.c.

- Research ➔ overpopulation fears unfounded

**What is a Couple?**

- Two people closely associated, bonded or paired with each other.
- At least one of whom is (moderately or mildly) intellectually disabled.

- A man and a woman – or same-sex relationship – involving two people engaged, married, living together or in a committed love relationship.

- Sometimes other configurations of two (e.g., parent & child living together, two roommates, parents of disabled, etc.).
LITERATURE/RESEARCH

Jastak et al (1963) → Delaware
- Marital success similar to general population

Medora Bass (1964) → (U.S.)
(1940s-1960s) Marriage OK, but no kids

Janet Mattinson (1973) → (England)
- 36 former institutionalized
- Majority happier than when single
- Helped each other re: weaknesses/Didn’t expect much
- Wanted to prove institution wrong

Hall (1974) → (US) 15 studies early as 1920s.
- People w/ ID often had successful marriages

Floor, Baxter et al. (1975) → (U.S.)
- 114 former institutionalized
- 80 married/15% separated
- Better than in average IQ/Single had more problems
- Married shared fewer personal (alcohol/illegal) problems.
- Help Budgeting, sex ed., b.c., advocacy, health

Ann/Mike Craft (1976, 1979) → (Wales)
- 25 marriages + 45 marriages
- Better success than average POP!!!
- Unidealistic
- Companionship overcomes loneliness

Munro (1977)
- Marriage most important, next to finding job

Andron & Sturm (1973) → UCLA: 2/3 happy

Koller, Richardson & Katz (1988) → British City
- Age 22 comparison
- Disabled less likely to evaluate their marriage as “bad”.
- Unidealistic
- 1/2 marriages going well.
- Financial, unemployment & sexual difficulties.

Ivan Brown (2003) → Quality of Life Research
- % who listed spouse or special person as source of support
- Physical support: 28% in independent living
- Emotional support: 37% in independent living

Kempton & Kahn (1991)
- Same chance of divorcing as nondisabled
- Preferred marriage over single life.
Our Society

Marriage

- Only fully accepted vehicle for parenthood & sexual expression (e.g., gay marriage advocates).
- Important developmental milestone
  ➔ admission to adulthood & competency as a sexual person

Married People

Tend to:
- Have better physical/mental health
  [Waite & Gallagher, The Case for Marriage]
- Benefit from companionship/
  overcomes loneliness.
- Have extended social networks.
- Nurture each other.
- Meet partner’s intimacy needs.
- Compensate for weaknesses in partner.

The Art of Loving

[Erich Fromm, 1956]

- Love is an art; & if we want to learn how to love, we must proceed as with learning any other art, say music, painting, carpentry or medicine.
- Love does not mean the absence of conflict. But conflict between two people is experienced on a deeper level…It leads to catharsis.
- To master…like any other art, requires discipline, concentration, patience, listening, faith or reliability, courage & humility.
Positive Support-Couple Therapy Model

- Little literature on couple therapy & support for people w/ I.D.
- Couples/Families report difficulties in finding therapists.
- “PSCT Model” combines established couple approaches, w/ strategies that recognize the complexity of couples with I.D. & their support systems.
- Helpful where close collaboration needed among the couple, extended family & services.

By Proposing this Model

I wish to make a strong case for experienced therapists to become more comfortable working with couples with I.D.!
**Therapists Must Be**

“**Unconditionally Constructive**”*

- Rationality
- Understanding
- Good communication
- Reliability
- None coercive modes of influence
- Acceptance


---

**Strength-based/Positive Psychology Perspective**

- Positive focus on what’s right, rather than wrong with couple, their family & agencies!
- Professional shows high level of energy, unflappable optimism, knowledge of resources, persuasiveness, humour & patience!
- Change occurs when strengths supported
- People are resilient – able to bebound from tragedy.
- Couple-driven outcomes, emphasizing self-determination & pursuit of couple’s dreams!

[Russo, Seleeby]

---

**Building a Relationship**

- Casual ‘small Talk’
- Empathic Listening
- Sharing a Coffee
- Using Humour & Simple kindness!
4 Possible Roles for Couple Therapist

- Consultant - advice to other couple therapists, agencies, clergy or family members.
- Mediator - impartial third party who helps resolve disputes among couple, family & agencies.
- Traditional couple therapist/Agency staff as co-therapist!
- Individual therapist, or refer to more appropriate professional.

Assessment

- Couple
- Extended Family
- Service System
- Thorough History
- Listen with 3rd Ear
- Sensitivity to cultural/religious
- Hypotheses (continually update)
- “What outcome…?”

Relationship Options

- ‘Going Out’ as boyfriend or girlfriend
- Marriage (with or w/o children)
- Religious Ceremony to celebrate love w/o signing a marriage certificate.
- ‘Common-Law’ Relationship.
- Long-term Sexual & Intimate Relationship, but living apart.
- “Platonic relationship w/ someone who is more special than a friend” [Donna Williams]
- Breaking-up, separation & divorce.
- Imaginary friends or fantasies.
- Single life
**Intervening: Couple, Family, System**

- Separate sessions with family
  - Couple often wants their approval

- Strategic use of (well-timed & appropriate) humour, frankness, cheerleading, inspirational or motivational talks.

- Couple-Centered Planning Meetings - e.g., increasing support network.

- Reassurance/Five Critical Questions

---

**Reassuring Families/Five Critical Questions**

- Is my relative physically & emotionally safe in this relationship?
- Is my relative really happy with this partner?
- Are money management, daily living & health needs going to be properly met?
- Is reliable birth control in place?
- Are they receiving enough agency support?

---

**To Parent or Not to Parent!?**

- PSCT Model neither encourages or discourages pregnancy/parenthood.

- Research shows many parents with I.D. can learn parenting skills (Auros & Feldman, 2007).

- Couples seeking counselling re: having kids should be fully informed about responsibilities, challenges awaiting parents.

- If suspicions about child neglect/abuse, consult with child protection agency (CAS).
**Private Couple Sessions:**
What Therapists Need to Know!

**Private Couple Counselling Sessions**
- Appear to be systemic biases!
- Private sessions important part of Model.
- Reinforces notion relationship is important!
- Often 6-12 sessions, every 2-3 weeks, later augmented w/ occasional “booster sessions”.
- Couples w/ ID are often honest & motivated to receive help.
- “Make sessions fun/half the work is done!”

**Active listening ➔ powerful!**
- careful note taking

**Learn to clarify, label & channel intense feelings**
- Interviews in private office.
- Frequent repetition …clinical impressions & advice (quieter, slower, clearer, more succinct, request eye contact)
- Use language used by couple
- Role-play

Role Play

&

Beh. Rehearsal

↓

Repetition

↓

Often love it!

- Meeting the inlaws
- Saying “No” to:
  - visits from relatives
  - sexual advances
- Coping w/ domineering people
Better Management of 
Anger 
+ 
Jealousy

Why Can’t You Shut Up? 
Anthony Wolfe

Disengage!
“Two Minute Rule”

“Stop/Think/Go 
Anger & Jealousy Management”
Teach Rules for Fair Fighting
[Bach & Goldberg]

- No physical hurting or violence
- “Here & now”
- Avoid global terms ➔ level specific concerns
- Win-Win
- Make appointments to fight
- Don’t hit below psychological “belt-line”
- Admit you’re both to blame
- Handicaps given to lightweight fighter.

Identifying
“Cognitive Distortions”

“Ways Your Thoughts
Play Tricks on You!”

“Cognitive Distortions”
- All or nothing thinking*
- Overgeneralization
- Mental Filter
- Discounting the positive
- Jumping to conclusions—mind reading
  - fortune teller
- Catastrophizing*
- Emotional reasoning
- Should statements*
- Labelling*
- Personalization & blame
**“Reframing”**

Teach re-thinking, change one’s perception of a person or situation, in a less emotional, more constructive & rational manner (e.g., “depressed”, rather than “lazy”; “wise” rather than “stupid”, diabetes as “an advantage”, anxious for “controlling”, “good parents”).

► People learn to pass it on!

---

**Education re: Sexuality, health & hygiene, & Dealing with Sexual Dysfunction**

- Dealing with myths
- Masturbation
- Sensate focus
- Viagra

---

**Making “Behavioural Requests”**
Encourage
“Complementary Behavior”

- Vision/Hearing
- Handle money/Drive
- Read & write/Cook
- Physical care/Companionship
- Understands speech/Doctors’ appointments

Instruct Couple
Effective Boundary-Setting

Inlaws
‘Bad’ people
Finance
Spec Olympics
Circles Program
DIRECT COUPLE TO HAVE MORE

FUN!!!

Cheap Dates/
Vacations
Creative, Practical Approaches

e.g., sing strategies, read sections from self-help books, visual & augmentative communication

Psychiatric Assessment

John + Margaret
Marg (33, Down Syndrome), John (35, ID)
- Talking seriously of marriage
- Mother requested couple counselling
- Complemented other’s limitation.
- Arranged session with parents (dad was hostile re: John)
- Brother threatened lawsuit/Mom intervened.
- STOP/THINK/GO
- Marriage preparation.
- Postponed wedding for a year.
- Reframing
- Couple-centred planning meetings.
- Psychiatric consult/medication
- Walked down the aisle/TEN YEARS!

IN CONCLUSION
- Love relationships for couples w/ ID can be very “successful”!
- We still need more…
  - Clinical literature
  - Research re: methods/models of couple therapy.
  - Therapists expand practice to this under-serviced population

What Couples with ID can Teach Us!
Value of…
- Companionship
- Lowering your expectations
- Realizing anyone can be beautiful & desirable
- Seeing that money isn’t needed for happiness
- Loyalty & gentleness
- Compensating for each other’s weaknesses
Family Triangles

- Smallest stable unit of relationship is 3.
- When 2 people unable to resolve problem, tendency to include 3rd person (e.g., affair, interfering inlaw, child).
- Stabilizes relationships... but also freezes conflict in place.
- Most problems that bring families into counselling turn out to be triangular.

Prognosis?

Successful
Happy

- No violence/Not overly controlling
- Stand up to family disapproval
- Commitment, sexual fidelity
- Compatibility w/ sexual expression/values
- Positive family & system support/modelling
- Adequate agency & professional support
- IQ & adaptive behavior in mild range
- Regular expressions of kindness, respect, concern for partner.
- Willingness to go for counselling
- Couple teamwork to weather “rough times”
- Common interest & values (Tim’s)
- Good daily living skills
- Complementary skills
- Separate/shared activities
- Resolved issues re: b.c., parenting, kids
- Have fun! Enjoy spending time together
- No history of severe, untreated M.I.
- A ‘spark’
- Significant courtship before marriage/moving in together
- Premarital counselling & marriage preparation
- Successful financial management

**Premarital Preparation**
- SCCT Model recommends this.
- Consultant Vs. Therapist/Teacher

1. **Individual-Conjoint Counselling**

2. **Group Marriage Preparation**
   - Best if familiar faith group or agency.

- Are you ready for marriage? Right partner?
- Joys & responsibilities
- Sexually education
- Birth control, desire for kids/responsibilities
- Employment/Income
- Roles/Division of labour
- Managing conflict
- Assertiveness, labelling/expression of feelings
- Housekeeping, cleanliness, hygiene
- Health, diet, food preparation & refrigeration.
- Leisure activities, exercise, stress management
- Supporting your partner/When to ask for help
- Wedding planning
Munro
“Three Year Rule”

- Must go out for at least three years, before you marry or live common law.
- Applies to both people who are disabled & nondisabled!

Key Variable
Are the partners willing to stand up to their own families?

Ethics of Couple Decision-making

- Personal Choice
- Human Rights
- Pleasure seeking
- Empowerment
- Dignity of Risk
- Social Role Valorization
- Health & Safety
- Non-violence
- Respect for the Law
- Emotional Stability
- Rights of Others
- Informed Consent
**Classic Couple Difficulties**

- Abuse of alcohol/drugs
- Demand unsafe/unprotected sex
- Misuse of power/Violence
- Neglect or mistreatment of children
- Suicidal or dangerous attention-seeking
- Property destruction or hygiene complaints
- Chronically overspent/Serious financial difficulties (e.g., sex lines, cars, etc.)