

# Cultural Adaptation of Couple Therapy in the Cultural Context of Iran



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# Neurobiology of “we.”

We have moved from a “single skull” model of the brain to the “neurobiology of “we.”

**Dan Siegel**





# What Have We Learned From Brian Research?

- People are **neurobiologically** interconnected with a speed and intricacy far beyond what psychotherapists-those presumed experts on relationships-once imagined.
- From brain research we have learned:
  - how easily one partner's tone of voice can trigger the other's amygdala,
  - how the mirror neuron system can directly shape our ability to grasp each other's inner world,
  - how few of the countless implicit messages passed between people in any interaction are conveyed by language or even become conscious.



# Brain Research and Emotional Assault

- Brain research suggests that the part of the brain that processes an **emotional assault** use the same part to processes a **physical assault**.
- When an individual is verbally assaulted by a partner, the brain responds as though he or she is being punched in the stomach, prompting the same toxic mix of fear and rage.



# Why Clients avoid Couple Therapy?

- They want to avoid the **unwelcome challenge of self-confrontation** that accompanies hearing their partner express dissatisfaction with them and their relationships.
- Why should partners **expose their deepest vulnerabilities with the very person they may see as the cause of their emotional struggles?**





# Why Therapists avoid Doing Couple Therapy?

- When working with an individual, we get to establish a one-on-one relationship that's usually pretty rewarding for us.
- Most of our clients feel positive toward us.
- Many express appreciation for our efforts.
- We get to apply skills that we are already good at: active listening, understanding, and acceptance.
- If a power struggle emerges, there is usually far more calm predictability in the process of addressing it than happens when angry spouses square off against each other in our offices.



# Learn to Provide Couple Therapy!

- **“Individual therapy can be hazardous to a couple health.** The calm understanding environment of one-on-one sessions too often leaves a client ill prepared to take the gritty, emotion-charged real world of a troubled relationship.” (Bader and Peterson, 2011)
- In sessions, individual clients are not learning how to listen, stay calm when triggered, negotiate actively, or stretch to empathize with an intimate partner who intensely annoys and frustrates them.
- “Good couple therapy sometimes hurts.” (Bader and Peterson, 2011)



# Challenges for Iranian Couples

- Socio-Economic and Class Status
- Gender and Power
- Issues of Parenting and Child Rearing
- Religious Compatibility
- Community and Social Issues
- Cultural Celebrations
- Time Orientation
- Political views
- Extended family relationship
- Health and Stress
- Juggling roles and responsibilities





# Iranian Couples Challenges

- Iranian couples who report experiences of cultural discrimination are more likely to exhibit verbal aggression and violence than positive communication patterns
- Economic marginalization and higher poverty rates can place considerable strain on some Iranian couple relationships.



# Raising Iranian Cultural Differences in Treatment

- Therapist often error on one of two extremes
  - Don't mention the topic until it maybe mentioned by clients
  - Raise them prematurely before the therapeutic relationship has been established
- Client's response to the cultural related questions of therapist may vary according to their own cultural identification.



# Culturally Specific Treatment

- Assess the couple's needs with an emphasis on culturally grounded behavior.
- Identify culturally related strengths and supports
  - Look for strengths and supports that have a cultural connection
  - Personal strengths (pride in culture)
  - Environmental supports (extended family, places of worship)



# Culturally Specific Treatment

- Dependency is now legitimate in relationships.
- Based on attachment theory, the partners are no longer seen as either dependent or independent.
- Dependency is seen as either effective or ineffective.



# Culturally Specific Treatment

- Focus on resolution of conflict is misguided.
- Gottman's research revealed that most conflict (69%) in relationships is perpetual.
  - Based on lasting differences in personalities and needs.
- Couples need to dialogue about perpetual issues or live in a state of 'gridlock'
- Goal is to manage conflicts rather than resolve them.





# Culturally Specific Treatment

- Couples need to identify and communicate:
  - their sense of purpose
  - the meaning of how they move through time together
  - their priorities and values
  - what they hold to be sacred
  - their goals and missions, ethics, morality
  - philosophy of life and religion
  - their legacy from their families and culture
  - Relationship with families of origin