

“Couples” vs Individuals

In TEAM you decide how you will work, that is with couples or parent/child, etc. Together (two people in the room at once) or as individuals or both? The modality you prefer will influence the pros and cons listed below.

Individual Work

This is the most common way David presents relationship work and is the easiest approach. This is my approach and works very well for telehealth. In this approach we only work with one individual in session. Likely only one will sign up. In some cases you might have both sign up to work with you individually, but you'll treat each one as if they were the only one doing the work.

Pros: It is easier to do empathy and you can focus clearly on the person in session. There is no mediation involved or redirection of conflict. Once you have full commitment, the improvements are faster, and if you need to transition to mood work or SDB work the client feels free to express what is really going on for themselves. This works well for all kinds of relationship problems especially considering we often have patterns that happen with multiple people.

Cons: You may not see problematic dynamics. It's unfair and feels unfair to the client, especially in circumstances where you see a lot of errors in the partner. IE: there was an affair but the person who had the affair isn't doing any repair work.

Couples Work

This is the most common expectation of relationship work and what clients (and some clinicians) think will work best. Usually this is because they are convinced that it's the other person who is the “real” problem and they are coming as a couple to fix the other person. Usually the one who initiates the therapy is the one who thinks it's the other person with the problem, but they will emphatically say they know it's 50/50 and are invested in working together.

Pros: You can more fairly address repair work if there was a trust rupture.

Cons: It is much harder to hold the reins and keep each person accountable to doing their own work. You must be skilled in redirection to keep the sessions from ending up as mediation sessions. You may not (likely will not) get equal buy in. Thus one will be doing more homework than the other which can cause more conflict and frustration. It can be hard to sit with open hands if one partner is doing lots of work.

Doing Both!

Of course, there is a way to marry the two approaches. You can do 2-4 individual sessions, making sure both individuals have signed a full disclosure agreement. Then you can move to couples work once they each have completed a relationship journal in full. They can then work on the 5 Secrets together in session as well as other tools you think would benefit them.

Pros: You can establish good therapeutic regard before getting into the harder tools. It's easier to manage the beginning sessions. You get the benefit of doing the other relationship work such as teaching them live in session the 5 Secrets giving them both feedback, or other tools like EFT work. The best of both worlds so to speak. You can speed up the work because you can address issues right in the here and now rather than the client just “telling you” what happened.

Cons: You may not get equal buy in, see above.

DEEP DIVE Pros & Cons to Individual vs Couples work

Here's a detailed comparison of the **pros and cons** of each approach (DISCLAIMER: take all of the following with a grain of salt as I am not an expert. I also used some AI in researching which may not be 100% accurate):

✅ Pros of Dr. David Burns' Approach (Individual Work with 5 Secrets)

1. Empowers the Individual

- **Focus:** The individual gains full responsibility for how they contribute to the relationship dynamic.
- **Benefit:** This can create rapid change because it avoids the common "blame game".
- **Example:** If one partner learns how to communicate with kindness, empathy, and respect, the dynamic of the relationship often shifts—even without the other partner present.

2. Breaks the Cycle of Blame

- **Focus:** Dr. Burns focuses on helping the individual stop blaming their partner and instead examine their own role in the conflict.
- **Benefit:** This can defuse conflict quickly since the person learns to de-escalate arguments through better communication rather than trying to "change" their partner.
- **Example:** Instead of saying, *"You never listen to me!"*, the person might say, *"I feel lonely when I don't feel heard. Can we talk about that?"*

3. Less Defensive Reactions

- **Focus:** Since the partner isn't present, there's no immediate defensiveness or fighting during sessions.
- **Benefit:** This allows for **deeper introspection** without worrying about the partner's reaction.
- **Example:** If someone says, *"I think my partner is being selfish,"* We might use Identify the Distortions or even Positive Reframing, IE: *"What might be something good about that?"* — helping the client break their negative thought patterns.

4. Faster Progress (in Some Cases)

- **Focus:** The therapy bypasses couple conflicts and dives straight into what the **individual can change**.
- **Benefit:** Positive change from one partner often indirectly shifts the behavior of the other partner.
- **Example:** If one person starts communicating with kindness and empathy, the other often softens.

5. Aligns with CBT Principles

- **Focus:** It leverages Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) principles like recognizing distortions, reducing blame, and improving communication.
- **Benefit:** It's practical and skills-based, so clients see measurable progress. CBT is an effective approach, as much as EFT, according to the limited research we have. TEAM is likely to be even more so.

❌ Cons of Dr. David Burns' Approach

1. May Miss Underlying Couple Dynamics

- **Problem:** Some relationship issues stem from **interaction patterns** (like power struggles or trauma triggers) that require **both partners** to be present to address.

Handout © by Angela Poch, RPC based on the work of Dr. David Burns. Items with * All Rights Reserved by David Burns, MD. Do NOT share handouts. You must own the Toolkit to use David's forms/worksheets with clients.

- **Example:** If one partner is being emotionally abusive, working solely with the victim may or may not resolve the core issue. A good intake will as well as doing Mood work will be key to offset this.

2. One-Sided Effort

- **Problem:** If only one person is working on improving the relationship while the other is disengaged or unwilling to change, it may feel unfair.
- **Example:** The person doing the 5 Secrets may feel resentful if their partner doesn't respond positively.

✓ Pros of Traditional Couples Therapy (Both Partners in the Room)

1. Addresses Real-Time Dynamics

- **Benefit:** The therapist can **see firsthand** how the couple communicates and intervene in the moment.
- **Example:** If one person constantly interrupts or stonewalls, the therapist can immediately call it out.

2. Shared Accountability

- **Benefit:** Both partners are equally responsible for improving the relationship.
- **Example:** There's no "I'm fixing myself while you're not trying" dynamic.

3. Uncovers Deeper Patterns

- **Benefit:** Traditional couples therapy can more directly address **attachment wounds, conflict cycles, or power imbalances** in the relationship.
- **Example:** The therapist may notice that one partner has an avoidant attachment style, while the other has an anxious attachment style.

4. Promotes Mutual Understanding

- **Benefit:** Having both people in the room allows them to understand each other's perspective.
- **Example:** One partner might say, *"I didn't realize how much I hurt you."*

✗ Cons of Traditional Couples Therapy

1. Blame Game Trap

- **Problem:** Sessions often turn into *"who's right and who's wrong"* arguments.
- **Example:** *"You always do this..." / "Well, you never do that..."*

2. Slow Progress

- **Problem:** Sessions may get bogged down in fighting rather than creating solutions.
- **Example:** The therapist spends most of the session de-escalating arguments instead of teaching skills.

3. Defensive Partner Syndrome

- **Problem:** One partner may feel attacked or ganged up on, making them resistant to change.
- **Example:** *"You're just siding with them!"*

4. Surface-Level Changes

- **Problem:** Without addressing cognitive distortions or internal belief systems, changes may be temporary.
 - **Example:** They may communicate better in session but fall back into old habits at home.
-

✓ So Which Is Better?

- This is a clinical decision you get to make since both appear to have similar efficacy.
-

💡 Compromise: The Best of Both Worlds?

Some therapists now combine **Dr. Burns' individual work** with occasional **joint sessions** to:

- Teach the 5 Secrets to one person first.
 - Once the individual sees improvement, bring in the partner for joint sessions.
 - This keeps the **focus on personal responsibility** while also addressing real-time dynamics.
-

Sources:

The Five Secrets of Effective Communication by Dr. David D. Burns, MD:

- <https://feelinggood.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/0af5a-the-five-secrets-v-1.pdf>

Five Secrets of Effective Communication by Dr. David Burns (Video):

- <https://feelinggoodinstitute.com/technique-video/the-feeling-good-therapist--the-five-secrets-technique>

Mastering the Five Secrets of Effective Communication:

- <https://relationship-repair.com/mastering-the-five-secrets-of-effective-communication-building-stronger-connections/>

Differences Between Individual, Group, and Couples Therapy:

- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-healing-crowd/201501/differences-between-individual-group-and-couples-therapy>

Couples Therapy vs. Individual Therapy for Relationship Problems:

- <https://bostoneveningtherapy.com/couples-therapy-vs-individual-therapy-for-relationship-problems/>

Couples Therapy vs. Individual Therapy:

- <https://theempoweringspace.com/couples-therapy-vs-individual/>

Couple Therapy in the 2020s: Current Status and Emerging Directions:

- <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10087549/>

The Most Effective Couples Therapy, by Far:

- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mindful-relationships/202101/the-most-effective-couples-therapy-by-far>

Reflection on doing Couples Relationship Work

Some questions you can ask yourself to see if you'd prefer working with couples together or individually:

Personal Preferences and Skills

- Do I enjoy managing complex dynamics between two people in real-time? Am I skilled at navigating high emotional intensity and conflict that can arise in couples sessions?
- Am I willing to make one client do all the work in relationship repair?
- Can I guide a client to see the relationship from the other person's perspective giving them the skills, but they are having to do all the work or would I rather see those dynamics for myself and be more hands on?

Theoretical Orientation

- Does my therapeutic approach (e.g., TEAM-CBT, EFT, Gottman) lend itself better to two in the room?
- Do I believe that relationship issues can be solved through individual relationship work, or do I believe real-time interaction between partners is key to change?

Emotional Tolerance

- How comfortable am I with potential hostility or intense conflict in session?
- Can I stay neutral and avoid taking sides when couples present conflicting narratives?
- Am I comfortable setting boundaries and structuring sessions when couples get emotionally charged rather than falling back to empathy?

Logistical Considerations

- Do I have the time and energy to manage sessions for two people rather than one?
- Am I comfortable managing situations where one partner may want confidentiality, while the other wants full transparency or conversely am I willing to make both parties commit to full disclosure and transparency? Is that even an option under my licensing?
- How do I feel about situations where one person may feel blamed or excluded during couples work, will I be able to remain neutral and unreactive?

Doing Couples Relationship Work

When working with couples the agenda and workflow may look a little different. Many of the following will apply to any relationship work with two or more people in the room but there will be some differences for hierarchal relationships, especially parent/child. More on that later, but I will make some notes here as well. See Appendix for Pros & Cons of working with Couples in the same room at the same time.

1. Establish a Collaborative Agenda

- **What to remember:**
 - Always clarify **both persons' goals** for therapy.
 - Acknowledge their individual goals.

- **Why it's important:**
 - It prevents the therapist from becoming the referee.
 - Ensures both feel heard.
- **How to:**
 - Do a Miracle Cure question for each person. Is there a common goal? You may end up with 3 or more goals.
 - **Example:** *"What would success look like for each of you in this therapy?"*

2. Avoid Taking Sides

- **What to remember:**
 - It is natural for people to expect the therapist to **validate their side**. Especially the one initiating therapy.
 - Therapist must remain **neutral and balanced**.
- **Why it's important:**
 - Taking sides erodes trust.
 - It shifts the focus from "fixing the partner/child" to improving the relationship.
- **How to:**
 - Do brief 5 Secrets for each person. Keep responses short.
 - **Example:** *"I can see Marg you feel hurt and disappointed. I can also understand Jake might feel defensive and annoyed."*
 - Interrupt as needed to keep moment moving forward and not allowing one person to dominate the session.
 - Do a DML for yourself (the therapist) if you feel triggered and aligned with one person more than another.

3. Focus on Process, Not Content

- **What to remember:**
 - People often bring **specific problems** to therapy (For couples this might be: money, in-laws, parenting. For parents this might be: child outbursts, disobedience, not behaving in school, etc.).
 - The therapist should shift the focus to **how they communicate about problems**, not the problems themselves.
- **Why it's important:**
 - Solving one problem won't prevent future conflict. We want to focus on skills they can have for a lifetime.
 - Improving 5 Secrets skills along with Forced Empathy and letting go of blame leads to **long-term change** and increased intimacy.

- **How to:**
 - Let them know you will be teaching them the **5 Secrets of Effective Communication** (Disarming, Thought and Feeling Empathy, Inquiry, “I Feel” Statements, Stroking).
 - **Example:** *"We are going to focus on communicating in a way that fosters intimacy and connection. This is not just about listening or telling the other person how you feel, but it's a transformative change in how you connect with each other. Let's start with writing out a Relationship Journal. Can you give me a specific moment in time when you had a conflict?" Fill in Step 1 and 2. Best for each of them to do their own RJ.*

4. Protect Client Well-Being

- **What to remember:**
 - Some couples have issues beyond communication (abuse, addiction, infidelity).
 - If there is ongoing harm, the therapist should prioritize safety and well-being, even if it means separation in session or referral.
- **Why it's important:**
 - Protecting the client is the first ethical responsibility.
- **How to:**
 - Some may require individual therapy first.
 - Be able to refer out, create safe exit plan, etc.
 - **Example:** *"Given what you're describing, I think an individual therapy session or sessions may be needed to ensure both of you feel safe and supported."*

5. Assess for Abuse or Coercive Control

- **What to remember:**
 - Domestic violence, emotional abuse, or coercive control can significantly undermine therapy outcomes.
- **Signs to watch for:**
 - One person dominating conversations or decision-making.
 - Fearful body language or nervousness.
 - Minimizing abusive behavior ("It's not that bad.").
- **Action to take:**
 - If abuse is present, prioritize safety and consider separate therapy or external support.
 - NOTE: Mandatory Reporting vs Confidentiality. Check your legal/ethical requirements in your jurisdiction.

6. Identify Emotional Disengagement

- **What:** Where one person (or both) has mentally checked out.
- **Why:**
 - is a major predictor of divorce.

- Can't do 5 Secrets (build trust and connection) in this state
- **Signs to watch for:**
 - Flat affect or indifference during sessions.
 - Frequent statements like *"I don't care anymore."*
 - Lack of responsiveness when the partner/child/parent shares feelings.
- **How to:** Acknowledge the disengagement, validate feelings and/or ask the person to do 5 Secrets if you've covered that already, and explore what caused the emotional detachment via personal work.

7. Observe for Patterns of Contempt or Disrespect

- **What:** belittling, sarcasm, or disdain
- **Why it matters:** Contempt is a major sign of relational breakdown, Gottman's #1 predictor of divorce. It creates a cycle of mutual disrespect and hurt.
- **Signs to watch for:**
 - Eye-rolling, scoffing, or mocking during conversations.
 - Using harsh language or character attacks (*"You're so lazy."*).
 - Constant criticism disguised as "joking."
- **Action:** Point out contempt as destructive. Do a CBA of blame and then an EAR checklist. Work through any underlying hurt causing it.

8. Monitor for Conflict Avoidance

- **Why it matters:** Avoidance often leads to long-term disconnection.
- **Signs to watch for:**
 - Refusing to engage or shutting down when conflict arises.
 - Long periods of silence in response to confrontation.
 - Leaving the room or disengaging during conflict.
 - Apologizing to deflect. The only time apologies are valid is when there was a wrong committed and when apologizing it should end with an invitation to discuss more.
 - IE: "I'm sorry I shouted at you yesterday. I was feeling so angry. I can imagine you felt hurt and maybe misunderstood or even annoyed. What was happening for you?"
- **Action:** Help the withdrawing partner express their internal experience. Encourage structured communication. Affirm it's ok to have different reactions to situations and couples can address issues after the fact if they are feeling too intense in the moment.

9. Watch for Unresolved Grief or Trauma Influencing the Relationship

- **Why it matters:** Past trauma (from childhood, past relationships, or major life events) can shape relational patterns.
- **Signs to watch for:**
 - Overreactions to minor conflicts.
 - Extreme fear of abandonment or rejection.
 - Projection of past trauma onto current relationship.
- **Action:** Normalize the impact of past trauma. Address it through individual work.

10. Monitor for Therapeutic Alliance

- **Why it matters:** If one person distrusts the therapist, therapy will stall.
- **Signs to watch for:**
 - One person feeling the therapist is biased.
 - One person feeling unsafe or misunderstood.
- **Action:** Continuously check in on alliance through the ETS and a brief check in from time to time, IE: “Do you both feel heard and supported?”

Practice

Groups of three. Two people be the couple and one person is the therapist. Practice ONE round of empathy and ONE interruption.