

Schema Therapy for Couples & Marriages

By

Chiara DiFrancesco, Ph.D.

Chair, ISST Subcommittee on S.T. for Couples and Marriages

This article attempts to describe some of the unique contributions Schema Therapy for Couples & Marriage offers. The process, very different from other therapies, is described along with an explanation of the advantages of this approach. Hopefully the reader will get an idea of what to expect if they should wish to pursue Schema Therapy (S.T.) for their most important relationship. In addition, it is hoped that persons, hesitant about what possibly can be done with their marriage or couple relationship, can be educated and inspired to give this approach a try – especially as it is quite unlike cognitive or method oriented therapies. Professionals can learn from this article what this therapy is like, and may become interested in participating in further training to enhance what they are able to offer clients.

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Uses of Schema Therapy with Marriages & Couples

Schema Therapy for individuals and couples was developed by Dr. Jeffrey Young. It can be an instrument to heal mild to severe couples and marital relationship issues, indirect and overt conflicts, inability to connect, lack of trust between partners, over-independence when couples live separate lives, unsatisfying sexual relationships, lack of communication or dialog, negative communication, lack of shared interests values and goals, lack of emotional expression or connection, angry reaction patterns, withdrawal and stone-walling, personality disorders, affective disorders, interference in the relationship from substance abuse, sexual or other addictions, abusive or punitive relationships, multiple affairs, personality clashes, and lack of attachment. S.T. can bring reconciliation and healing forgiveness, creating understanding where there are deep wounds and betrayal.

S.T. can especially assist clients where they are ambivalent about their marriages. It can help drifting and detached couples become vibrantly close and connected. Its process and principles help to fulfill the needs of each partner in a balanced and non-judgmental way that is compassionate and caring.

The utilization of the client/therapist relationship

Through careful development of the therapist/client relationship the therapist, even with only some small amount of openness from the clients can begin to offer couples hope and a way out

of helplessness. The Schema Therapist is positioned to visualize the distant route for healing – how to bring the clients to the point of being able to make healthy, versus summary, unhealthy and uninformed decisions regarding the relationship. Even in those cases that seem hopeless, if the client chooses to not give up, the therapy protocol keeps on promoting every reasonable effort.

S.T. for couples and marriages teaches, models, and allows the couple to experience things they have always wanted to feel, and to actually find themselves doing what is healthy. By empathic connection with the client, the therapist helps the client actually fight at an emotional gut level unhealthy patterns called coping responses.

S.T. will show persevering partners how and what it means: to develop or stay in Healthy Adult Mode; to productively use the Vulnerable Child Mode to eventually re-parent their own inner “vulnerable child”; and to limitedly “re-parent” their spouse. The conceptualization of how to accomplish passing on this re-parenting technique to the client, so that it helps the couple to mutually heal self and partner by enabling them to de-escalate their recurring clashes, has great potential. If clients cooperate with ongoing genuine care and interest (versus for example, an ulterior motive of dumping the other no matter what), even hesitant persons have the potential to re-discover (or perhaps discover for the first time) true love with their partner. What makes S.T. stand out from other therapies is that if the tools are applied according to the constructs, almost any couple relationship has the potential to become good, of course given sufficient work and commitment.

A therapy that diverges with consummate hope

This S.T. vision diverges from theories that state certain relationships are fundamentally incompatible. They may be grievously difficult, but rarely ever fully hopeless. Though as schema therapists we may hesitate to say “never”, given enough commitment to the process, it seems an “almost never”. When the therapy proves ineffective, analysis points not to therapy deficiency, but rather on the lack of persevering healthy attitudes, fortitude of the couple, and/or the limits of the specific therapist in technique, insightful awareness, or personal ability to accurately empathically confront – rather than Schema Therapy itself.

This therapy proper is based on the highest principles of caring and genuine empathy. The individual client, however fractured, is cared for, and this extends **equally** to both parties in the relationship. This vision of “enduring hope commitment” is what sets Schema Therapy apart from most other therapies. It refuses to capitulate to the client couples’ recurring emotions of hopelessness, but encourages their step by step collaboration in fulfilling their ultimate need – relational healing. The goal is to attach with love and hope to the person in whom they have invested and made a commitment. It is usually the sad lack of hope that makes commitments waiver. However, S.T.’s therapeutic tools initially challenge the effects of past pain, then re-shape disorder-personalities, and finally engage persons who heretofore were emotionally detached, and in seemingly hopeless situations, to properly and newly attach with lives/families rebuilt.

S.T. for Couples incorporates a foundational attitude of actioned but limited "re-parenting" to fulfill a person's unmet human needs. This same technique is used in S.T. for couples and marriages, between the therapist and each partner, between the individual Healthy Adult self and their Vulnerable Child inner self, and between the partners themselves. This unique experiential technique effectively changes the emotional experiences of the couple in a permanent fashion for the better.

The concepts of S.T.

S.T. has an advantage of easy to grasp concepts, such as coping techniques, modes, and schemas. These educate and make sense of past experiences to the client – and open the door to freely speak about what they presently feel connects. These concepts allow the therapist and client to communicate about the patterns that circumstantially developed inside an individual's inner world – and give clearer explanation of what is experienced – such as, body sensations, varied feelings, their more aware thoughts and beliefs, and much more. When the client learns their own patterns and the origin of how these came about, one's whole life tends to make sense. Better yet, the process, mutually applied, progressively gives the couple the tools that open ways to intercept habitual negative interactions and personality patterns, and actually moves to change them. Few therapies offer so strong a change potential, and at the same time create a culture of mutual acceptance and understanding.

Most of the difficulties mentioned above are learned attitudes, behaviors that stem from understandable past and present experiences, coupled within one's genetic disposition in reacting to specific "schemata" – the early maladaptive schema patterns that the clients individually experienced during their early development. The resulting understanding provides both a key to un-learning the maladaptive patterns while simultaneously learning a new non-judgmental attitude of compassionate understanding. In the therapist-directed process each one discovers how one's partner and self are conditioned by what they experienced – and equally if not more so, by what they failed to experience.

While a systematized research study of Schema Therapy for Couples with comparison data to other therapies has not yet been conducted, many studies in the area of Schema Therapy are currently underway. The statistics of S.T.'s effects with regard to its significant therapeutic outcomes are being compiled, including those for group therapy and personality disorders.

Going for empathic understanding, not mere acceptance

Another valued positive contribution of ST for couples and marriages is that it clearly *defines and separates the behavior from the person* by asserting that the concepts of acceptance are priority to agreement. The "acceptance" that wishes to move to agreement must first go through the channel termed "empathically-understand". Once they experience the empathic understanding of the therapist towards each of them, clients often feel moved by it. This experience helps them to apply it to each other. What begins to make it doable is that the client

observes the therapist confront unhealthy behaviors while at the same time being empathically understanding. This newfound experience nudges the client out of a defensive stalemate, bringing them up to be empathic, as empathy does no longer have connotations of compliant surrender to what is destructive. Empathy disarms the guardedness and resistance that confrontation produces if it stands alone. The example of empathic confrontation modeled by the therapist, rings true to self for the giver, and stuns the receiver, much like a stance of Ju-Jitsu goes with, rather than against, an on-coming force.

This limited re-parenting attitude allows each to be capable of giving their partner growing and learning time as each struggles to become their healthier selves – that is, once each recognizes that caring does not mean agreeing with or accepting the offensive behavior itself.

Learning from what does not work

Schema Therapy actually developed essentially from existing relationship failures – not just from the fact that some relationships and personalities present problems most difficult to reconcile – but specifically from the failure of therapists, using cognitive methods, being able to reach certain clients who essentially were stuck in relationship patterns that kept their needs unmet. Other failures involved those who did not have the ability to even want to relate, those whose emotional patterns and rough edges were so intense that any cognitive techniques were ineffective in producing lasting effects when the couple got triggered – but most especially with those clients who were never attached in a positive and secure way to a parent or to any human being. Such fractured clients often have little ability “to make up their minds” regarding relationship choices in any way that is healthy. Left to themselves they only repeat unhealthy patterns and self-destruct over and over.

These are some so-called “therapy failures” about which therapists might say.... *“Well, we can’t work harder or want it more than the client”,* or alternately, *“They need to make up their mind if they want to stay on or leave...”* All such messages essentially amount to the therapist backing off and giving up by putting all the responsibility into the hands of the sick patient to heal themselves, or even to want a healthy solution. Most clients have only a general idea of what they need and have no expert ability to cope effectively over time and get their needs met with any stability. They tend to either escape situations or fall back into familiar “ineffective tried and failed” emotional coping patterns, because the foundational healthy self is simply not there. S.T. for Couples and Marriages takes a dramatically different approach. This is described in the sections below.

The Typical Initial Problem

Although the inability to attach or sustain closeness usually indicates severe cases of personality disordered clients, especially those with Borderline Personality Disorder, it unfortunately also presents itself in a milder form with many intimate relationships. In the latter, persons simply have no clear vision of how or if things can change for the better, and they tend to cope in ways almost guaranteed to cause a loss of faith in the partner and detour the relationship itself. Hence

the over 50% divorce rate. This result comes not necessarily because that is what the couples really needed or wanted, but rather that they lost hope that anything even somewhat satisfactory could possibly exist with the said partner long term.

A therapy with a road map

Marriage failure is sort of like having a nightmare where one is lost in a town where the ambience is familiar but where every road to “Happiness-by-Fulfillment” is strange, detoured and misleading. Without a “road-map” and expert guidance, confidence, trust and understanding succumb to dark immobility. For couples in a disordered and diseased relationship self-help is a non-answer. The light of expert direction from a knowledgeable therapist who accurately conceptualizes why you each get “stuck”, the lost clients at least have a chance to go down a new and productive path. The Schema Therapist offers a customized map and the navigational assistance of creating new emotional experiences of satisfying relationship. Schema Therapy for Couples and for Marriages places a therapeutic stent opening arteries clogged with years of negativities and misunderstandings and allows the blood of positive reconciliation to flow. Simply put, it initiates or restores healthy connection. As such, Schema Therapy sublimely provides an open channel, an intensity of hope and re-parenting direction in “Couples’ Relationship Correction”.

The method

When a couple enters Schema Therapy, the following method is engaged. The therapist starts out with an extremely thorough conceptualization of the unmet needs of each partner, and then proceeds to identifying how these multiple and varied unmet needs have formed substantive maladaptive schemas. A conceptualization then follows with the clients’ main coping methods, their predominant modes, how the modes shift, and what then triggers their schemas. Using the therapy relationship itself – the resultant connecting trust between therapist and client – the clinician analyzes what qualities to develop and focus on in a caring and genuine therapeutic relationship with the individual partner in the couple relationship. The therapist targets “unmet Vulnerable-Child core needs” in the client and educates the client both on what this means and feels like, and tries to provide a limited experience of the antidote to these schemas. For example, where a client has not been sufficiently affirmed in childhood to develop self-confidence, the trusting relationship between client and therapist is utilized where the therapist affirms and helps to create new, long-overdue, confidence-building experiences for the client.

The therapist then devises a personal-customized “road map” that is offered to the client, and with the latter’s informed consent proceeds to treatment. Whether or not clients at this point understand how to get to their goal, the therapist navigates it with them, and the journey simply begins to happen. As the therapy develops in this open and involved professional relationship between client and therapist, the client begins to get not only a concept, but also a FEEL for what it is to have an unmet need finally met. The therapist can co-parent a client to re-parent oneself and experience what it is to have a relationship that is SAFE and FEELS like the good thing one always needed.

This discovery is often a new experience – to have an emotional connection that creates a limited dependency with another human for meeting needs – yet at the same time is completely respectful and builds individuation, resilience, and the capacity to transfer this experience of nurturing their own inner self into connecting with their partner.

The learning experience with the therapist becomes a bridge to an interdependent connection with the partner, as well as a positive relationship commitment with one's inner self to meet one's own needs.

Actually walking a client through this “road map to fulfill an unmet need”, eventually puts the client in the long yearned – for position of being able to desire and obtain a true healing of relationship with the partner one has already invested time, and even endured rejection, emotional hurt and pain with. Who would want to waste that? All of the past – hurt, misunderstanding and even abuse – can be transformed into gain and meaning, as two now – bonding partners struggle to conquer and transcend past negativities.

On the other hand, what would result if unmet needs were set aside and foolishly endured? To merely escape and not deal with one's own past dynamics, either insures that the painful pattern of unmet needs will break one's current relationship, follows still unfulfilled to the next, or sadly remains as the status quo state of life with the current partner.

Not dealing with one's uncovered schema-driven patterns, guarantees that no ongoing relationship will ever be safe either from the threat of one's declarative decision to abandon it, or to find oneself so abandoned.

How can love ever be love with such a threat ever present? Clients know only too well what it feels like to have a one-sided conclusion imposed on them and acted upon by a negative partner. How different it would be if there could only be open and effective dialog about corrective possibilities, or at least a gentle exploration of them before a conclusion is unilaterally asserted.

A philosophy of hope, a therapy of hope

In a sense then, S.T. is a “philosophy” of hope and a consummate therapy of hope. It is a belief that is based on the scientific observation that all persons have basic needs, especially the need for a loving inner connection with themselves, and a healthy outer connection with another positively-responding human. Every person has such basic human needs, whether acknowledged or not. The point is that needs (as opposed to wants – casual, circumstantial desires) are universal across all human beings, times and cultures, and it is this very fact that feeds the hope of the two of you getting on the same page. The universality of needs, as opposed to wants, is exactly the point on which partners always have to agree, unless they are unaware, confused, or denying of their basic humanness.

Laying out the vision

It is axiomatic that all therapists must need to work toward what is truly best for their clients. What a positive endeavor and framework it is to help bring them to the point of becoming their healthy selves and connecting them to beloved others in healthy ways. A client needs a vision encompassing their partner to see what might or could potentially happen for good with schema healing, from the process of limited re-parenting, and from one's development of Healthy Adult Self. This will inspire perseverance in attaining true and lasting change. This basic awareness can foster a solid and determined adult judgment on how to handle their relationship in a way that will best benefit both.

S.T. is founded on the belief that this opportunity for healing and deep personality change lies within all human beings. Of course, nothing positive happens unless the client decides to engage and choose the behaviors and attitudes that lead to a commitment of love for one's partner. Success is never absolute, but the emotionally connecting relationship that is worked at collaboratively by therapist and client with the tools S.T. provides has the strongest capacity to urge a client's will to engage.

No doubt the Schema therapist has a set obligation to walk alongside, carry, guide, and bring the client from the vantage point of possibilities, to the gradation of probabilities, and finally into realities, which is distinct from many other types of therapies. For the schema therapist, two persons committed to following through in this manner of therapy, definitely "have possibilities", even if the battle to offset ingrained schemas is arduous. The "road map" presented marks the way to a realistic goal, and though one must journey through bypasses and detours to reach a "set-out-for" highway, hope can be sustained, as the therapist has witness-experience of major couple transformations.

Keys to accomplishment

The key to accomplishing such solid and significant marital and couple therapy is the intense individual conceptualization work, which positions each partner to where they become healthy enough to seriously assess whether their relationship is worth investing in. Such positive positioning results from the clients' simultaneous working on their self-focused healing goal that is engaged with step by step supervision from the guiding therapist. The latter has a special role – serving two clients who want to be healthy and heal their unhealthy relationship and – serving the relationship itself. The therapist has to be the therapist-ally of each separate partner, and the ally-sponsor to the relationship itself. The schema therapist ordinarily conducts individual intakes for each partner with a full schema conceptualization workup and history, as well as numerous individual sessions as a base for the later joint couple sessions.

If the relationship itself does not have such an ally, then the couple may individually lose the vision of what is possible. Hurt people often do not have a clear or hopeful vision of what can be, just as a diseased heart patient cannot imagine how they can once again become physically fit when they are at the moment so diseased and unfit. Generally, it is the doctor who knows the reality and what can change, who gently leads the patient to desire it. The therapist must not fall back and cave in to the passivity of those who are hope-deficient, feeling too discouraged except to recoil in pain, hurt, depression and anger. It is in the individual sessions with emphasis on

personal change of one's rough edges, where S.T. diverges dramatically from many other therapies and offers new hope. *Schema Therapy for Couples & Marriages is a consummate therapy of reality-based hope.*

In S.T. for Couples, the therapist, together with client cooperation, get to the healthy point of being able to more accurately appraise the "possibilities" of the relationship engendered by S.T.'s "limited re-parenting" connection with the client. This term refers to the aforementioned close and open relationship the therapy creates between the therapist and client – where the client almost inevitably experiences some degree of need fulfillment, empathy and comfort – the kind a good parent would give a small child. It is affirming, objective and limit-setting. It would teach and confront the growing child's unhealthy attitudes and behaviors with a constant attitude of warmth and caring. It allows for a child's autonomy, or the ability to think, choose and act, yet provides for safe learning and the support for correcting discovered mistakes. This stance is how the clinician treats the adult client.

With this unique relationship with each partner, the Schema Therapist is positioned to intervene in a way no current structured therapies appear to provide. The therapist becomes a mutually accepted unifying bridge between the couple, and the therapist's shedding of light into their pit of darkness offsets their relative schemas that produce such hurt and hopelessness.

Re-parenting & the development of devotion

After the therapist assists the couple by bridging the two of them, the couple will learn by guided experience and session-practice how to use S.T. themselves and actually "re-parent" each other in a limited and mutually welcome way. With therapeutic coaching guidance they will learn to empathically feel each other's core schema origins, and to practice in being adept at avoiding negative triggers. With flashcard reminders the couple rounds the corner and treats their partner with a different schema sensitive approach which at a feelings level is geared to specifically de-escalate "schema clashes".

It is this heart-felt image of "the little one" inside the re-parented partner that becomes more and more difficult to forget, and oh so rewarding to remember. As all this mutual reconciling begins to flow together, so does the limited re-parenting and filling of each other's needs. Compromises readily occur, clashes are reduced in intensity, the processing of the "regrettable incidents" happen more quickly and easily, adrenalin is lowered through mutual soothing, and couples spontaneously invent creative ways that they never imaged before.

Partners begin to be amazed that their reciprocal rough edges can be smoothed and that their original hopes, trust and love begin again. *This process of "mutual re-parenting" creates a love that can best be described as "devotion".*

We believe that this quality of need-filling, emotionally compassionate, limited re-parenting truly does resolve the past. It creates devotion. And, like a nucleus everything else orbits around it. In fact, it has the potentiality of creating a sort of "nuclear reaction" in "**Reinventing the Couple**". In devotional love's absence all learned techniques and tools tend to whirl off and

replace partners into their own former clashing orbits. That is precisely why women, especially, tend to have a common limited belief about whether their partner can truly change and have the patterns endure. They tend to hypothesize that if it wasn't in the guy's feelings to begin with, it makes this newly learned personality pattern very unsafe to trust that it will last. The measuring stick often tends to be the feelings, and they will often even state, don't change "for me" – an even more unsure development. Guys, who tend to be more pragmatic, usually conceptualize another error, though in the opposite direction. They want to conquer it and learn it, convinced that is all it will take. Then, when the emotions do get triggered, they are frustrated why the "counseling" did not work. The truth is somewhere in the middle. It takes a lot more work than a guy usually expects. On the other hand, the battle is indeed on the gut level, as women intuitively often know. However, it is not as hopeless as she may think. When the guy's emotions of loneliness and incumbent abandonment face him, together with the possibility that he might fail, then the emotions do push him to learn. And, when the leaning is at a re-parenting level with the therapist, what was never "him" before can become a new desire, experience and reality. In fact, he can become so emotionally engaged in this new healthy way of being, that even if she does not believe in him any longer, he often may stay committed to his changes none the less. **When the partners each engage in an emotionally driven and cognitively understood battle against their respective schemas with a re-parenting attitude towards each other, then the schemas no longer dictate the outcome of the relationship, and devotion blossoms.**

Devotion emotionally arises from love initiated by gratitude, conceived through positive experiences that powerfully supply the partners need for secure connection and a sense of belonging. In its unifying force any thought of ending a mutually fulfilling relationship becomes an unthinkable option, being totally against one's perceived self-satisfaction and interest. The perception that it is to one's good to persevere in the relationship through all of its ups and downs, ultimately comes from a sense of devotion. In this author's opinion, Schema Therapy for Couples and Marriages frequently creates such relational devotion.

Value for the couple & marriage even with one cooperator

Schema Therapy for Couples and Marriages has significant value even when only one partner comes into therapy or cooperates. It is correctly stated that when only one person in a couple becomes healthier, the relationship can be 50% or greater, changed and improved. It sets up one partner as a seeker and attempting-reconciler. No matter if the "unhealthy other" engages in retaliatory conflict as a result. In such a case, more open conflict might be healthier than where one surrenders their humanness, natural rights and inner spirit out of fear of reprisal, rejection or whatever. So, when a coupled-individual engages in personal and independent Schema Therapy, one's self value can and should be asserted, defended and attained unilaterally. One's individual growth is a variable under one's own control and holds value regardless of even the other partner's inimical non-receptivity.

Some emotionally deprived partners might resist seeing value if their spouse does not come and share in the "Couple's Therapy". But, if one becomes healthy enough to objectively reflect on whether their own improvement has merit, S.T. time and effort will be well spent. This is hard

to face when love is not reciprocated, but even in spite of a less than desirable outcome, many clients feel they attained personal gain, and stand on the hope that they might yet find a way to get the other to participate and connect. Ultimately it is a healthy realization that even a loving individual does not have complete control over the outcome of a relationship. It always takes reciprocal effort. As opposed to some therapies that fall apart as soon as one partner stops participating, S.T. seems to be uniquely strong in providing an individualistic therapeutic path of improving the relationship, as well as an individual internalized perception of value in the time and effort spent in therapy to improve the relationship, even if going it alone with therapy. This can unilaterally stabilize a health-seeking client, for **when** (versus “if”) a partner is not receptive, the other, determined not to go down to “ground zero”, can still focus on the base relationship with self, formed by a healthy self-love and acceptance. This means that the individual within the couple relationship learns increased self-worth by enhancing and strengthening their own inner “dialog”. Their own self-affirmation and determination to set safety limits and boundaries, along with developing their own sense of direction and determination to fill their own unmet needs when no one else will – is truly healthful. Hope convinces the client that this can still be accomplished with strong individual therapeutic work. A client can learn and come to this point of internal positive attitude in Couples and Marital S.T. that does not require the agreement nor consent of the partner. That indeed is liberating!

Tools of S.T.

Some of the tools S.T. uses in its couple and individual interventions are:

- Guided imagery
- Chair dialogues
- Mode identification and dialogues
- Using the relationship between therapist and client itself
- Cognitive conceptualizations of the schemas, coping mechanisms, and modes
- Tonal regulation
- De-escalation techniques for self and partner, individual and shared, when flooded.
- Extensive and focused history-taking
- Elucidation of core beliefs regarding self, others, the world, and philosophies of life
- Cognitive awareness and flashcards
- Role-playing
- Limit-setting
- Limited re-parenting

Capacity of the therapist

To be a couple's therapist in S.T. one has to be: primarily, expert in individual Schema Therapy; not fearful of intense affect from and with clients; very caring and committed/genuine; sufficiently schema-healthy to either not be triggered or able to recover from triggering even if from the client; intellectually capable to creatively understand and define the two realities, the schema conceptualization of each client, discern how these clash, and develop a method to get around the clashes.

A new emergence of hope and devotion

In conclusion, if done properly Schema Therapy for couples and marriages frequently engenders a new emergence of hope. Many couples have found that it truly re-invented their relationship. It allows for a measure of connection never previously experienced, embodying a special experience full of hope that facilitates and guides partners to an interchange that both heals and *creates a sense of newfound devotion*.

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