

# Heightening in Couple Therapy

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Across couple therapeutic modalities, heightening interventions have been proposed as a mechanism of change. The current article describes how behavioral and emotion-focused heightening techniques can be facilitated in couple therapy. We provide actual case examples of psychotherapist interventions aimed at heightening couples' relational or emotional interaction. Ultimately, heightening encourages couples to confront difficult topics together, express vulnerable emotions, and make new meaning of the lived experiences that might be interfering with the quality of their relationship.

*Keywords:* couple therapy, communication, intervention, therapist, heightening

Couple psychotherapy has been found to be an effective modality to increase relationship quality and stability (Sexton, Ridley, & Kleiner, 2004). In the process of couple psychotherapy, clinicians seek to assist couples in managing negative communication patterns, find solutions to ongoing problems, regulate intense emotions, and ultimately deepen the emotional/relational connections between partners (e.g., Jacobson & Christensen, 1996; Lebow, Chamber, Christensen, & Johnson, 2012). Although numerous interventions have been proposed to address couples' concerns, in this article, we will examine the process of *heightening*, an umbrella term that includes a variety of interventions with the intention of exposing the emotional/relational connection between partners by directly expressing affects and conflicts, without passing messages through a therapist. When these expressions are funneled through a therapist, the emotional intensity, vulnerability, and intimacy can be dampened. In other couple dynamics in which emotional or physical safety is not easily established, the reduction of emotional intensity can be desired so as to lower reactivity and to generate a safe container for intense exchanges. However, when couples are struggling to sustain an intimate bond or discuss deep-rooted needs or conflicts, heightening interventions foster direct expressions and problem-solving conversations. More specifically, we define heightening as interventions that: (a) target or prompt both partners simultaneously, (b) elicit a direct connection between partners, and (c) enable partners to communicate issues that have been previously avoided or have been superficially discussed.

These three elements of heightening interventions have their roots in systems theory. Systems theorists promote interventions that focus on the couple as the primary client, with couple-oriented

interventions preferable to individual-oriented interventions in couple therapy (Johnson, Makinen, & Millikin, 2001). In this way, cyclical couple interactions are often targeted as the key dynamic associated with partners' distress or change, rather than an individual's responsibility. Consistently, the etiology of many couples' presenting problems stems from both partners' perpetuation of the barriers to intimate connection and attainment of personal needs (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981; Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004). Relationship distress often manifests in dysfunctional communication patterns or in partners' attitudes and values about the relationship (e.g., feeling stuck or stifled in the relationship). Moreover, these problems can be perpetuated, reaching stagnation or impasse, when discussions of vulnerable feelings are replaced by defensive maneuvers to shield from attack or hurt (Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004).

Psychotherapists face an initial challenge of engaging both partners in the process of couple therapy. Many couples enter psychotherapy in the wake of devastating arguments or piercing emotional voids, which over time can ultimately leave them inept in knowing how to move forward or feeling unmotivated to make changes. Accordingly, the establishment of a strong alliance with partners and the generation of common couple goals can be important for the effectiveness of interventions and for positive therapy outcomes (e.g., Friedlander, Escudero, Heatherington, & Diamond, 2011; Owen, Duncan, Anker, & Sparks, 2012). Systemic alliance describes the process in which partners and therapists attempt to work in a cooperative and mutually engaging manner during the therapy hour (Pinsof, 1995). Accordingly, there are four alliance components: (a) the alliance between each partner and the therapist (client–therapist alliance), (b) perceptions of the alliance between the therapist and one's partner, (c) the alliance between the partners (client–client alliance), and (d) the collective or group alliance among all members in therapy (Pinsof, 1995). Although all four components are important (Pinsof, Zinbarg, & Knobloch-Fedders, 2008), we illustrate the ways in which interventions may target different subsystems of the alliance in couple therapy (see Figure 1). For example, reflecting a statement from one partner and then asking the other partner a question would likely target the client–therapist alliance (and possibly affect perceptions of the alliance between the therapist and one's partner or (b) described previously). Heightening interventions directly target

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The authors thank Dr. S. A. Fras for her contributions to the article.

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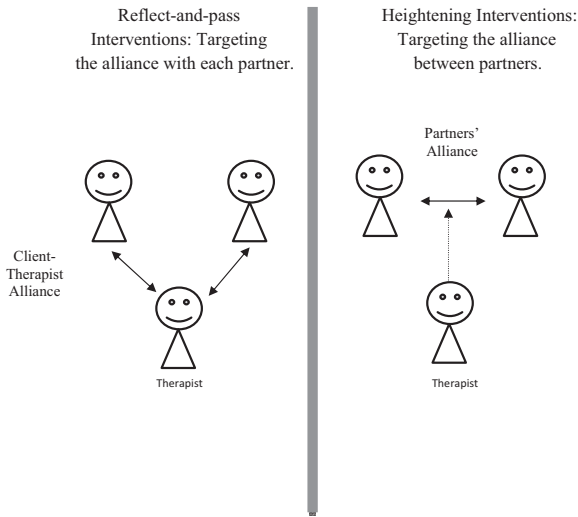


Figure 1. Heightening interventions and systemic alliance interplay.

the alliance between partners, rather than the alliance with each partner, with the intention of promoting healthy and honest connection to the benefit of therapeutic outcomes.

Heightening interventions are evident in many couple therapy approaches. For instance, in behavioral couple therapy, therapists frequently facilitate and teach structured communication skills; wherein, one partner is “the speaker,” and the other partner, as “the listener,” reflects back what the speaker is saying, and both partners share the speaker and listener roles (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010). In this way, couples directly express affect, intentions, or reactions to one another, without passing messages through a therapist. The efficacy of this approach has been supported in a dismantling study, isolating the effects of this structured communication skill, in which couples who were taught the skill demonstrated more positive communication patterns at 6-month follow-up as compared with couples who were not taught the skill (Owen, Manthos, & Quirk, in press). Alternatively, in emotion-focused therapy, a therapist might heighten the emotional experience for couples by choosing to intensify particular responses—by repeating a phrase or focusing on enactment of problems that are contributing to couples’ maladaptive patterns (Johnson, 2004). Heightening in couple therapy is a cornerstone intervention, which has contributed to the success of emotion-focused therapy (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988).

Given the broader definition of heightening we are suggesting here, it is important to understand what is not considered a heightening intervention. The clearest examples of nonheightening interventions include interventions that primarily focus on one partner (e.g., asking a question or reflecting feelings of one partner or providing advice about the relationship), even if the psychotherapist balances interventions between partners. For example, a psychotherapist could provide a reflection of one partner’s concerns (reflection) and then ask the other partner what he or she thinks/feels about their partner’s comments (pass). This reflect-and-pass intervention could be useful, especially when the goal of the intervention is to manage negative affect between partners. However, the reflect-and-pass intervention does not necessarily

heighten the connection between partners, as the communication is going through the therapist (e.g., no direct connection between partners). Additionally, couple-level interventions (interventions that are aimed at both partners) do not automatically qualify as heightening interventions. Consider the following intervention, taken from an actual couple therapy session:

*Psychotherapist:* “So, um let me ask you this, in terms of how you deal with each others’ emotions, when you are scared about something or angry about something, how do you two talk about that?”

This question was directed toward both partners, thus prompting both partners simultaneously; however, it did not promote direct connection between the partners or deepen their emotional bond. In fact, each partner went on to describe their experience of dealing with emotions to the co-psychotherapists (vs. directly expressing this to each other).

We will illuminate three heightening interventions in couple psychotherapy that include a focus on behavioral and emotion-focused approaches. These three heightening interventions are merely examples and they are not intended to be an exhaustive list of potential heightening interventions. We provide case materials and summaries from actual therapy sessions,<sup>1</sup> which are part of a larger study.

At the most basic level, behavioral heightening interventions attempt to get couples communicating with each other. For instance, a common psychotherapist suggestion that illustrates this point is: “I think this is an important topic, and I am wondering if you two could turn your chairs toward each other and engage each other in this conversation.” In this heightening intervention, partners no longer direct painful or intense emotion through an intermediary (the therapist), but instead, direct these messages toward one another. This increases the likelihood that partners will then engage the material with each other, directly confronting important dynamics that may have previously felt too unsafe or overwhelming to discuss openly. How partners handle these conversations can then be processed by the therapist—highlighting supportive moments, reactive responses, or withdrawal.

Another behavioral example of heightening is the use of the speaker–listener technique. During higher conflict moments or when discussing particularly sensitive topics, a psychotherapist may suggest partners use the speaker–listener technique, as in the following example:

*Psychotherapist:* Well, I am wondering if we could try out a different way to talk about this. It seems like you both are really spinning your wheels when you discuss this issue, and, well, it doesn’t seem to be working. I guess I’m wondering if you guys would be ok with trying out a different technique. (One partner shrugs, the other nods hesitantly). Well, it might seem a little bit weird or awkward at first, but I have really seen it help couples have a different conversation when they keep getting stuck. So—the idea here is that one of you will be the “Speaker” and that person will hold this card, which means they have “the floor” so to speak. The other person will be the “Listener” for that part of time. The job of the “Speaker” is to try to get across your message

<sup>1</sup> Clients provided informed consent to therapy and the research protocol for client material; some nonessential information has been altered to protect the identity of the couples.

and to feel heard. The job of the “Listener” is to only listen, (chuckle). It sounds easy, but the tendency might be to rebut what your partner says or to try to insert your position. But, for this exercise, you cannot do that. All you can do is listen, and then reflect back what you heard. Try to listen to what they are saying and the take-home point that you hear—and repeat that back. Don’t worry, you guys will switch roles after a few minutes, and you will get your chance to talk about your reaction or response. The goal of this is that you both feel really heard. Do you guys feel like you want to give this a shot? (Both partners nod). Ok, who would like to start as the Speaker?

*Client Laura (speaker):* I guess I can start. Well . . . like I was saying before, when you don’t come to bed with me at night, I don’t feel like you really want to spend time with me. Like, whatever is on TV is more important than being with me. It’s just the same shows every night, what about me?

*Client Sam (listener):* Okay . . . (laughs nervously) . . . so you want me to come to bed with you. . . . And you feel like when I don’t . . . you don’t feel important?

*Client Laura (speaker):* Yes. Right. I . . . I want to go to bed at night with my husband. I like that feeling. And I want to feel like you want that too.

*Client Sam (listener):* (tearfully). I do feel that way. I know you want me to come to bed with you. I’ll try harder to shut off the TV and do that.

Before this moment in therapy, the couple had spent considerable time (both in session and outside of therapy) arguing about this topic, with great focus on the issues and events and daily constraints that prevented them from going to bed at the same time. The psychotherapist suggested this heightening intervention with the hope of drilling through the surface-level content, to expose more meaningful affects. When the couple used this heightening technique, the content of their conversations shifted from a focus on the details and barriers, to what it felt like and what meaning was being made of the conflict. As such, their scores on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-4; Sabourin, Valois, & Lussier, 2005; Spanier, 1976) change from 13 to 12 (Sam) and 7 to 14 (Laura), which indicates Laura not only made a reliable change (i.e., change in scores of 3 points on the DAS-4), but their scores also exceeded the clinical cutoff for relationship distress, with scores above this point consistent with couples endorsing nonclinical levels of distress (i.e., clinical cutoff is 13 for the DAS-4). By using this technique, the partners went on to discuss feeling neglected and unimportant, instead of what time they should shut off the TV or how much TV was too much. These expressions were much more powerful when directed at one another, rather than mediated and reflected by a therapist. In this way, the speaker–listener technique satisfies conditions of prompting both partners to engage in the material through direction connection, and to expose avoided aspects of the dynamic.

Additionally, heightening interventions more directly target the emotional bond between partners. In this aim, the psychotherapist seeks to identify core emotional dynamics between partners that prevent meaningful connection, and to then give voice to these dynamics through facilitating direct expressions between partners. The following example from a couple therapy session exhibits an emotion-focused heightening approach.

**Pre-Intervention:** The couple notes that they are happier in their daily interactions and more positive; however, they mention that

they have not resolved painful dynamics/events from the past. Additionally, they express uncertainty about how to initiate these conversations in a productive and honest manner. When the partners describe how they are better able to get their needs met now, one partner states “I feel like I did not have a partner (in the past).”

*Psychotherapist:* “You mentioned resentment or being resentful about the situation that happened on Friday and before. Have you two had that conversation about the resentment?”

*Client Jacki:* “No”

*Client Eli:* Shakes his head indicating no

*Psychotherapist:* It seems like that is what is driving this conversation, because I feel like you are pulled-back a little bit, emotionally in this conversation. And I feel you holding onto that resentment as a barrier to allow you to express that and that is part of the invalidation about your experience. But, I guess I am wondering if you guys want to have a conversation about it?

*Couple:* Look at each other silently with a subdued affect.

*Client Jacki:* I am not sure where I would start that conversation

*Psychotherapist:* I could give you a starting spot?

*Client Jacki:* Okay, (smiles)

*Psychotherapist:* I wonder if you can say to (Eli) that you don’t want to feel resentful toward him?

The couple then engaged in a deeper conversation about resentment, identifying the source of it, and offering validation to each other. Without directly eliciting the couple to talk about the resentment with one another, they had gotten stuck in merely experiencing that resentment, but not knowing what to do with it or how to process it. In the therapy room, the couple moved from sitting at opposite ends of the couch while stewing in their resentment, to processing this painful experience, giving it words, and ultimately deepening their connection. Although there was no “easy answer” about how to not feel that way, the psychotherapist used this heightening approach with the intention that both partners could honestly confront this uncomfortable shared experience, thereby generating some hope that they might move past it. Subsequently, the couple expressed feeling like they were on the “same team”—a sentiment that was largely absent before this conversation. In this way, the intervention prompted both partners to directly connect about a previously avoided dynamic that was preventing movement. Over the course of seven sessions, their DAS-4 scores changed from 3 to 12 (Jackie) and 8 to 12 (Eli), thus indicating reliable change and is close to the clinical cutoff.

Another example from a psychotherapy session with a different couple illustrates the power of heightening interventions to expose affect or thoughts that partners are unwilling or apprehensive to state. These interventions can also be useful when partners correct the therapist’s assertion or perception, as in the next example:

*Client Randy:* I know he is mad at me for always being out with friends and working a lot. We argue about it all the time. But the truth is, there is nothing I can do about it. I am very busy, and I just need him to understand that. It’s just the way it is.

*Psychotherapist:* Sure. Well how about this—I want you two to turn your chairs toward each other and discuss this a little bit more. And I would like you to start with the point you were just making and look at your partner and say “I don’t care about you enough to try to change.”

*Client Randy: Well . . . I . . . It's not that I don't care about you. I do. I really do want things to be different. I wish I could spend more time with you. It's just really hard to . . . I don't know.*

*Client Pat: I mean, I know that you want to spend more time at home. But it really does feel like you could try harder to do that. And when you don't, I just feel like . . . (shrugs shoulders).*

*Client Randy: I know . . . I guess I just haven't felt like . . . you wanted me at home. When I am there, you are always on your phone or on the computer and I just . . . I guess I thought it was better to just be out.*

*Client Pat: I don't want you to be gone. That's the last thing I want. I just don't know how to talk to you anymore. I feel like treading on ice around you, not sure when something I do is going to be received well or not.*

When the psychotherapist articulated the perception or possibility that one of the partners simply did not care enough to change, the couple was able to directly wrestle with this deeper dynamic. In truth, the psychotherapist was fairly confident that the issue was not one of "not caring," yet offering this heightening technique was used to allow the couple to correct this interpretation, and to construct a different meaning. The couple shifted the conversation from making excuses about spending time together and bickering about details, to discussing feeling unwanted, and the environment within their home that contributed to these feelings. By the sixth session, their scores on the DAS-4 exhibited reliable change from 4 and 8 to 9 and 12 for each partner, nearing the clinical cutoff for relationship distress. Using a heightening intervention in this way ultimately allowed the unspoken perception of "you don't care enough to change" to be voiced, corrected, and addressed.

Heightening interventions can be an effective means of connecting partners in couple therapy by promoting confrontation and processing of avoided affects and topics. When these dynamics are engaged directly between partners, instead of passed through a psychotherapist, partners are more likely to experience greater vulnerability and honest problem-solving. Use of heightening techniques must be considered in concert with the therapeutic alliance. When couched in a trusted and supportive working relationship, psychotherapists can feel better assured that these approaches will be well-received by clients. Still, it should be acknowledged that these types of interventions can be anxiety-provoking, with fears about how clients will react to the immediacy and the higher level of emotionality. With that being said, heightening interventions can assist couples overcome impasses in the therapeutic process and ultimately address core concerns in their relationship.

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Received January 29, 2013

Revision received January 30, 2013

Accepted January 30, 2013 ■