

The impact of couple and family interventions

Long ago, there was a debate among couple and family therapists about the value of research establishing the efficacy and effectiveness of couple and family therapy. Some who espoused elegant systemic theories questioned the linear nature of such research and the methodologies (often randomized clinical trials) used to establish treatments as effective. Although such a challenging view of outcome research raises important questions that remain useful to keep in focus (Westen et al., 2004), over time these data have come to be widely accepted as crucial for our field. They establish couple and family therapy as effective in helping improve a wide range of focal problems and in improving family relationships and family processes. In addition, while some may still look at this work as a modernist imposition on what they view as a post-modern endeavor, this body of work has broad value for all systemic therapists and their clients in being largely responsible for assuring reimbursements for couple and family therapy and securing the place of relational/systemic therapies in national health systems.

Perhaps most crucial in disseminating the positive impact of couple and family therapy has been a series of special issues of the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* at intervals of several years—compiling the research assessing the impact of couple and family therapy in relation to specific target problems. The first, edited by Pinsof and Wynne (1995), was especially notable, being the first review of couple and family therapy research broken down in this way by the impact on focal problems, while also clearly articulating the challenge to develop further research. Two similar special issues under the editorship of Sprenkle followed (Sprenkle, 2003, 2012) that updated and extended this initial set of findings, further establishing the efficacy and effectiveness of couple and family therapy.

And this January, the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* published a decade update of the state of this research edited by Wittenborn and Holtrop (2022). The papers in this issue confirm that couple and family therapy impacts substantially on a broad array of problems, adding evidence for its efficacy on some problems not previously in focus in the earlier special issues, such as anxiety, trauma exposure, adolescent suicidality, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. For the first time in the *JMFT* series, the reviews in the issue are all organized in a way that speaks to level of evidence (e.g., distinguishing established treatments as well-established, probably efficacious, possibly efficacious etc.) (Sexton et al., 2011), as well as summing those assessments across intelligible sub-groupings of treatments (e.g., attachment-based interventions; family psychoeducation). For the first time as well, the issue includes a consideration of research assessing relationship education (Markman et al., 2022). The special issue also includes a much-needed consideration of the problems in the representativeness of the diversity of clients in outcome research and the importance of reducing disparities in mental health treatment in ethnically diverse populations (Dwanyen et al., 2022).

Collectively, the reviews across the various special issues of *JMFT* together suggest couple and family therapy is effective in impacting couple distress, intimate partner violence, alcohol use disorder, substance use disorder, depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, trauma exposure, and anxiety in adults, as well as to conduct disorder, alcohol use disorder, substance use disorder, suicidal cognitions and behavior, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in adolescents and children. Additionally, couple and family therapy has been found helpful in ameliorating a wide range of health problems. And, perhaps most importantly, couple and

family therapy has been shown to impact relational processes in the service of treating these problems.

The specific findings of this special issue are supported by another prominent recent decade review, this one by Bradbury and Bodenmann focused on couple therapy (Bradbury & Bodenmann, 2020). The reviews of couple and family therapy in the *Annual Review of Psychology* and the *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* have also served to mark the progress in establishing couple and family therapy as efficacious (Christensen & Heavey, 1999; Lebow & Gurman, 1995; Snyder et al., 2006). Bradbury and Bodenmann highlight that evidence-based couple therapies impact 60%–80% of couples; that there is a small list of evidence-based couple therapies; that those evidence-based therapies do not differ in their impact; that effects of couple therapy decline over time; and that couple therapy offered in treatment-as-usual effectiveness studies have less impact and higher levels of couple drop-out than those in the more tightly controlled efficacy studies. They also point to the impact of relationship education, which, while small in effect size, has great importance, especially for those who enter such programs with relationship difficulties. These findings converge with those in the articles about the treatment of couple distress (Doss et al., 2022) and relational education (Markman et al., 2022) in the *JMFT* special issue.

Undertaking these sorts of reviews of the literature are enormously time-consuming and provide a major service to the field. Of course, reviews of this kind can only open conversations about couple and family therapy and its impact. For example, research methods evolve, and the merits of different designs can be debated. Another conversation centers on how many studies, including what breath of populations, may be regarded as sufficient for treatments to be considered evidence-based. Yet another conversation centers on the reality that therapies evolve so that over decades treatments that become well established may be no longer widely practiced (e.g., behavioral marital therapy has been succeeded by enhanced cognitive-behavioral couple therapies). Broad considerations of outcome data also need to be supplemented by attention to more fine-grained analyses, such as examining the moderators and mediators of change, what treatments work for which clients in which treatment contexts with what therapists, the impact of common factors and shared strategies in therapy outcome, and individual case conceptualization.

Still, these reviews make it clear that progress has been substantial-- especially given the limited funding available in the United States and elsewhere during this century for studies assessing couple and family therapy compared to the funding of research on psychopharmacology and other biological treatments. The field becomes more solidly grounded in science with each of these decade reviews, as couple and family therapy comes to be established as effective stand-alone intervention for a broad range of problems, as an essential part of a multi-modal treatment for others, and the only treatments with substantial evidence for impact on relational difficulties, such as couple distress. We are grateful to *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* for taking on this task and look forward to the 2030 version of this special issue.

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