From Homework to Hypothesis: Reducing Shame and Blame in Couples Therapy

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Michal Goldman, LCSW, is a licensed clinical social worker specializing in relational therapy and therapist development. Michal holds extensive training in emotionally focused therapy (EFT) and discernment counseling, and she enjoys supporting couples through relational challenges. In addition to her clinical work, she is an adjunct professor for psychology and social work, and she regularly writes and speaks on topics in therapy, ethical practice, and relational work. She is passionate about helping clinicians integrate attachment theory into everyday clinical practice and deepen their self-of-therapist awareness to enhance their work with individuals and couples.

Shame

- “I’m bad” versus “I did something bad”
- Reduces curiosity
- Increases defensiveness
- Withdrawal

Attachment-Informed Therapy

Create relational safety

Reduces shame to create change

Giving Homework

- Pro: helps with acquisition and development of skills
- Pro: helps symptom reduction
- Con: delays client empowerment
- Con: reduces personal authority

Experimental Frame

Recommendations are framed as experiments

Benefits of Using Experiments

1. Takes away success/failure binary
2. Data is more important than outcome
3. Curiosity and feedback prioritized
4. Increases relational safety
5. Empowers clients

Language Matters!

- Instead of:
  - Try this—it should fix xyz
  - Make sure you do this during the week

Use This:

- Let’s experiment with this and see what we learn
- Any outcome gives us information—there’s no good or bad
- If it doesn’t happen, we can use that data to figure out a way that works better

Why This Works

- Preserves dignity (prevents shame)
- Supports honest reporting
- Keeps therapist out of evaluator role

Self-Assessment Question

When a client reports that they did not try a strategy or intervention that was suggested in the previous session, which therapist response is most consistent with the experimental framework discussed in this course?

A. “It’s important to complete the exercise so we can see progress in therapy.”

B. “Let’s try the same intervention again this week and make sure it gets done.”

C. “I’m curious about what got in the way of trying the experiment this week and what we might learn from that.”

D. “If the intervention wasn’t attempted, we may need to reconsider whether therapy is the right fit.”

Self-Assessment Question

When a client reports that they did not try a strategy or intervention that was suggested in the previous session, which therapist response is most consistent with the experimental framework discussed in this course?

C. "I'm curious about what got in the way of trying the experiment this week and what we might learn from that."

Examples of Other Contexts

Couples counseling—prevents who did/didn’t do it “tests”

Child therapy—prevents added tension between parents/kids or decreased self-esteem or feelings of ability

Case Study

- Rachel and David, a married couple in their mid-30s, seek therapy due to recurring arguments about communication. Rachel often feels that David is emotionally distant and wishes he would open up more during conversations. David reports feeling overwhelmed when discussions become intense and tends to withdraw or change the subject. During a session, the therapist suggests a communication strategy in which each partner takes a few minutes to express feelings while the other listens without interrupting.

Case Study

- Rachel enthusiastically agrees to try the exercise during the week, while David appears hesitant but says he will try. At the next session, Rachel reports that she attempted the exercise twice but that David “didn’t really participate.” David explains that he felt anxious and avoided the conversation because he worried he would say the wrong thing. Rachel expresses frustration, stating that she feels she is “the only one trying.”

Case Study Clinical Questions

- What signs in the case suggest that the intervention may end up being experienced as a performance-based task rather than an experiment?

Case Study Clinical Questions Discussion

- **What signs in the case suggest that the intervention may end up being experienced as a performance-based task rather than an experiment?**
  - Overwhelmed by intensity
  - Hesitant
  - Worried about “saying the wrong thing”

Case Study Clinical Questions

- How could the therapist reframe the situation using an experimental framework to reduce blame between partners?

Case Study Clinical Questions Discussion

- **How could the therapist reframe the situation using an experimental framework to reduce blame between partners?**
  - “Did the tool work?” → “What did we learn from attempting it?”
  - Curiosity about what happened to get more information
  - Reframe the difficulty as data about their struggles

Common Pitfalls

- Using “experiment” language but implying expectation
- Subtle disappointment when clients don’t engage
- Moving too quickly to tools before safety is established

Ethical Considerations

- Power dynamics in assigning tools
- Cultural and contextual limits
- When client isn’t ready or doesn’t want take-home tools

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Thank you! Stay connected!

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Thank you!