

ME and WE in Couple Therapy

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When you expand your therapy practice to include couples work, there's a commonly overlooked shift to be made, and it's more complex than it sounds. Your focus and the way you practice changes with the expansion to couples work. It's exciting, you talk to colleagues, read articles, go to workshops and enjoy getting your office space ready.

You successfully managed the transition from student to therapist and mastered the therapeutic relationship with individual clients. You're enjoying that work and you're good at it, but there's a demand for couples work so it made sense for you to expand. Couples book and you're delighted, but when your efforts to connect with one partner alienates the other one, you don't understand why that's happening. The distress in session is palpable, the dynamic between partners is intense and you wonder if you *are* ready to do couples work.

This is the “*more complex than it sounds*” stuff that happens when you overlook the shift to a relational focus. The shift from ME to WE seems obvious in theory, so obvious in fact, that it's often dismissed in practice. Many therapists, maybe you too...started working with couples thinking they've made the shift to WE, but they're still focused on what's happening *within* the individual (ME) **when they should be focusing on what's happening *between* the partners (WE)**. If you're realizing you overlooked the shift to WE, don't worry, it'll be okay. I wrote this article for therapists just like you because overlooking this shift IS so common, just keep reading.

This article unpacks the *not so obvious* shift to a relational focus. When you read the whole article and make the suggested changes, you will be able to make the shift to WE and you'll be in a better position to help the couples you meet.

When overlooked, the “*more complex than it sounds*” parts of the shift to WE show up almost immediately. Couples go to therapy when they can't tolerate what happens when they don't see eye to eye. And make no mistake, the one who books the session is counting on you to “fix” the problem - their partner's problem.

However, if you focus on what's happening *within* the partners (ME) instead of focusing on what's happening *between* them (WE), you'll get pulled into their fight to be right and feel more like a referee than a couple therapist. At the beginning of this article I wrote, “*your focus and the way you practice changes.*” You have changed the way you practice, **but you haven't changed the more important part - *your focus***. So let's make that important change together now. Okay?

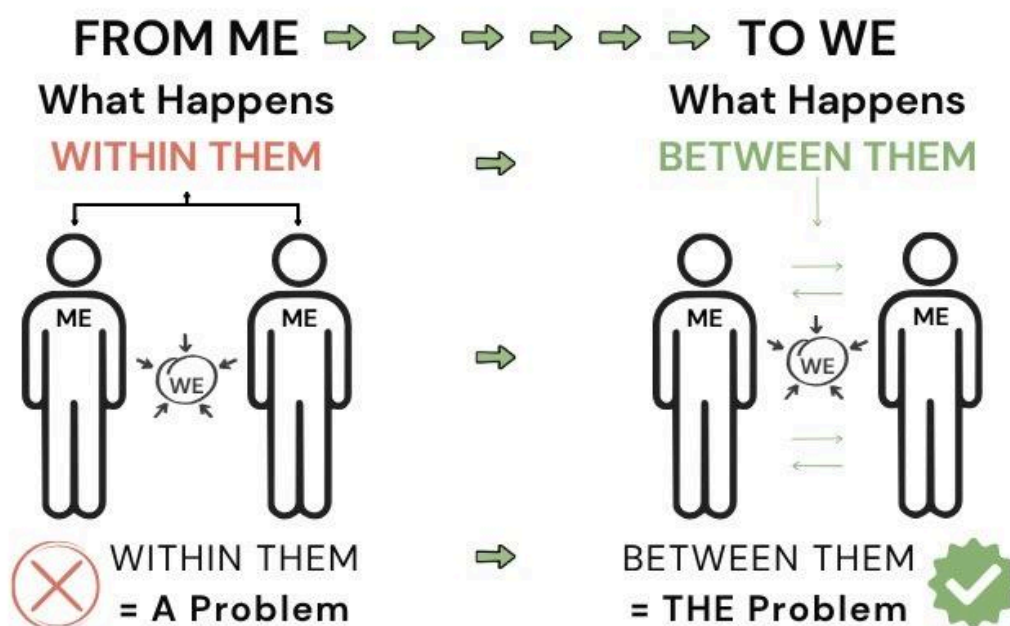
What's happening **within** the partner who booked the session mentioned above, is the emotional distress her description of the problem creates. What happened **between** the partners when they talked about her description of the problem, was an interaction that created enough distress that they booked AND attended a couple therapy session.

This may seem repetitive, but I don't want you to dismiss the shift again, so please keep reading, even if it seems repetitive, to make sure you get the difference I'm trying to convey. The emotional distress *within* the partners is a problem, but the distress *between* them when they talk about it - is **THE Problem - the relational problem**. Do you see the difference? If not, please go back and reread the last four paragraphs or email me and I will answer your questions.

What's happening *within* them is a problem, but what's happening *between* them is THE Problem. **Understanding the difference between individual problems and relational problems changes everything**. When you focus on the individuals, instead of focusing on the way they behave when they are part of a WE - **you miss the relational problem entirely!**

Fortunately, you understand the difference now, so you can shift to a relational focus. Look at the graphic below while thinking about your couples work so far. Consider the times you were focused on a problem **within** a partner. Did you get pulled into their fight to be right and feel more like a referee than a therapist? Did your attempts to connect with one partner alienate the other partner?

MAKE THE SHIFT TO A RELATIONAL FOCUS



Now, instead of focusing on what happens *within* the individual, focus on what happens *between* them - while they're talking about a ME problem. Focus less on what they say and more on the way they say it. What nonverbal actions and reactions do you see? When you notice a change in behaviour write down what changed and be specific. **For example**, did a partner raise their voice, change their tone or facial expression, add hand gestures or body language etc. How did the change affect the other partner? Notice any shifts in "what it feels like" *between* them. Is the intensity *between* them increasing? Write down what caused the change - **not what was said, the way it was said.**

This shift transfers the ME problem to the relational context where you observe what happens and identify **the relational problem - THE (WE) Problem - in action.** Remember, THE Problem in action is what happens *between* them when they talk about a ME problem. It derails their discussion and creates relational distress.

The feelings and thoughts *within* the partners perpetuate the verbal and nonverbal actions and reactions that cause relational distress - THE Problem. You will use model-specific interventions to alter the feelings, thoughts and behaviours that perpetuate THE Problem. **BUT, before you rush ahead to the interventions** - another common misstep - **you must FIRST identify THE Problem.**

Couples think ME problems are THE Problem. That's why they're not able to resolve either problem on their own. When you know the difference between a problem and THE Problem AND you help the partners understand the difference, they will be relieved. When you explain your plan to help them change what they do when they talk about a ME problem, it gives couples a sense of hope for their relationship. And they look forward to being able to resolve their problems on their own again.

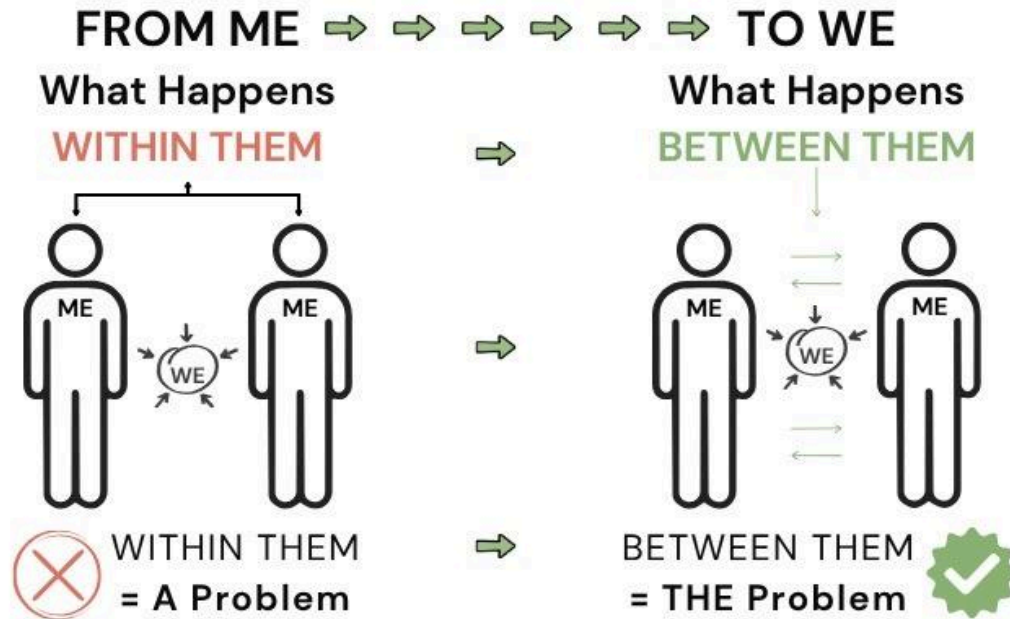
But none of that helpful stuff happens until you shift your focus from the internal processes and the emotional distress of the individuals to a relational focus on what happens between them.

Go back and practice this shift a few more times to make sure you understand it - in theory at least - before you try to put it into practice. **DO NOT SKIP THIS PART.** This is a deceptively complex shift and you do not want to overlook its significance again. The Practice Exercise is on the next two pages as a handout. Please don't hesitate to contact me by email if you have questions while practicing the shift or if you have questions about Couple Therapy Training and Supervision with me.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

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