A THERAPIST'S GUIDE

INDIVIDUAL CLIENT CONSIDERING DIVORCE AND SAYS THAT SPOUSE WON'T AGREE TO COUPLES THERAPY

THE SCENARIO

An ongoing individual client with serious marital problems, contemplating divorce but not being transparent about this with the spouse, is open to couples therapy with a partner who refuses to join them. In other words, an on-the-brink client is presenting as stalemated on couples therapy because of an uncooperative spouse. You want to make a referral because it would not be appropriate for you to do the couples' work but you are feeling stuck on how to help your individual client convince their spouse to seek couples therapy.

Step 1: Assessing the Client's Own Motivation

The client might be ambivalent about couples therapy, or at least not highly motivated, for a number of reasons including that it feels safer to work on marital problems in individual therapy than in couple therapy. It's common for the client to put the reluctance on the spouse when the initial obstacle is the client's own ambivalence.

- Ask if the client wants to do this couples therapy or is perhaps uncertain about it. Make room for ambivalence if it comes out.
- Try a 1-10 scaling question about how much they're interested in doing couples therapy: (1 = opposed, 5 = on the fence, 10 = urgent priority). Ask for clarification of the number.
- If it's not at least an 8, say that you'd like to explore the client's own sense of importance/motivation for couples before talking further about how to convince the spouse to get on board. "Given your spouse's reluctance, you'll have to really want this, and it's okay if you're not sure."
- Explore the ethical issue of whether to be more honest with their spouse about their pessimism for the marriage. The client might be ambivalent about pushing couples therapy because they are hesitant to say how bad

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things are. The ethical issue is one of fairness to the spouse about the state of the marriage prior to springing a divorce announcement on them because they would not do couples therapy.

Step 2: Exploring How the Client Has Been Bringing Up Couples Therapy

- Ask for specific details of how the client has approached their spouse (how often, what contexts, what words, what tone—go through a recent scene), how the spouse has responded, and what the client did next after that response.

- Listen for common ineffective approaches: not being clear about the urgency, backing off after initial opposition, taking some spouse objections at face value (like money or time), or only bringing it up while angry.

- Try to get a handle on the spouse's objections as they have come up in the past.

Step 3: Preparing Client for Discussions with the Spouse

Here is a "scaffolded" approach that starts mild and builds in intensity, and that is best done over multiple conversations. You can coach the client on this approach, paying attention to their fears and experience with being direct but not confrontational with the spouse. It can be helpful to use role play, with you playing the client and the client playing their spouse. The following material is framed in a language you might use with your client:

- Soft start-up: In a quiet moment not connected to an argument, say that you've been talking to your individual therapist about the benefits of couples therapy, and you're even more convinced than ever that it could be helpful to both of you and the relationship. Ask [name] if it's okay to talk again about doing couples therapy.

- Expect reluctance and resistance. Tell [name] that it's really important to you and that you really want their support. Expect arguments back.

- Say you are worried for your marriage if you don't get help. You could say it like this: *"I'm scared for us and our marriage right now. I love you and want to be married to your forever. But I am worried that my feelings are changing."*

- Do not criticize [name's] behavior—or else you will elicit defensiveness and counterattack. This is a "we need help" conversation, not a "you're not doing right by me" conversation.

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- Don't defend your own past behavior and your contributions to the problem. Instead, just keep saying that you know you have important things to change and you're willing to work on them in couples therapy. In other words, don't go down the rabbit hole of another argument about your marital problems. The focus is on getting help now.

- Say that you are asking for a commitment to at least try couples therapy, to come to an initial session to see if it might be helpful.

- If you and your spouse have tried couples therapy in the past and it was unsuccessful, acknowledge and hear out [name's] concerns. Share you own reservations about past therapy and say that your individual therapist can make a recommendation for a good couples therapist. Don't accept a "no" based on prior therapy not having worked. (That would be like swearing off all doctors because of a bad experience with one.)

- If your spouse stonewalls, repeat that this is a big deal to you and that you are worried and scared for your marriage. Then ask if your spouse will think about this and be willing to talk about it again.

- If your spouse refuses to say "yes" to thinking about it, say that you are troubled and hurt that your concerns are being dismissed, and that you will back off for now but will bring it up again. End the conversation on that note.

- Repeat the above approach in a couple of weeks, and then again in a couple of weeks, so that [name] knows that you are not letting it go of this as you did in the past. Let the pressure build, but with no angry confrontations on your end.

Step 4: Preparing Client for the "End Game" Conversation

If your client is unable or unwilling to stay in the marriage if the spouse will not agree to help seeking, following is an example of language they can use to speak from their heart without a time-based ultimatum. While the specifics have to be real for the client, offering them this kind of language can be helpful to make their best "final case."

"I can't control what you do and whether you want to work on these problems in our marriage. On my end, I am feeling my commitment to you leaking away. I hate feeling this way, because I still love you and want our marriage to survive. But that is what's happening inside me. I get that you're making a decision not to seek help, and I will have to make my own decision about whether I ultimately can stay with you if we don't get help. It breaks my heart to say this."

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