



# Couple Therapy

ROLE OF BEHAVIORAL COUPLE THERAPY  
IN TREATMENT OF SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS

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## Learning Objectives

At the end of this presentation the participant will be able to:

- Discuss the relationship between substance use and marital problems
- Describe the Behavioral Couple Therapy method
- Apply principles of Behavioral Couple Therapy to couples with substance use issues

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## Background

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH)

- An estimated 18 million alcohol users had an Alcohol use disorder in 2013

- Since 1999, opiate overdose deaths have increased 265% among men and 400% among women (SAMSHA, 2014)
  - 1.8 million people had an opioid use disorder related to prescription pain relievers
  - 517,000 had an opioid use related to heroin use

- In 2013, an estimated 855,000 people had a stimulant use disorder because of cocaine use

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## Relationship Issues

- Dysfunctional relationship
- High levels of relationship dissatisfaction
- High prevalence of verbal and physical aggression
- Significant sexual problems
- Significant psychological distress
- Instability evidenced by partners taking steps towards divorce or separation
- Medical Problems
- Legal issues
- Financial difficulties



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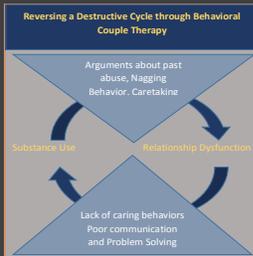
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## Relationship Destructive Cycle



•The relationship between substance use and marital problems is not unidirectional with one consistently causing the other

•Each can serve as a precursor to the other, creating a "vicious cycle" from which couples that include a partner who abuses drugs or alcohol often have difficulty escaping (Gurman, 2008, p.525)

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## Behavioral Couple Therapy (BCT)

•Founded on the principles of Marital Couple Therapy (MCT) originated in the late 1960's early 1970's

•(BCT) is the approach to couples and family therapy that has the strongest empirical support for its effectiveness

•Successful in broadly diverse populations, from very poor to wealthy, and among a broad range of ethnic and racial groups (Fals-Stewart, O'Farrell & Birchler, 2004)



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## Behavioral Couple Therapy (BCT)

• Highly structured, behaviorally oriented, skills-based, often manualized and largely psychoeducational

• Potential participants must indicate some evidence of relationship in order to be successful

• No gross impairment or psychosis that would significantly interfere with learning new information, practicing skills or completing assigned tasks

• Mostly effective with couples in which only one partner has an addiction problem (Gurnam, 2008)

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## BCT Method

• Partners must be married or, if unmarried, cohabiting in a stable relationship for at least 1 year

• Weekly sessions for 12-20 weeks over 5-6 months lasting 50-60 minutes

• Group behavioral couples therapy (GBCT), treating three or four couples together, usually over 9 to 12 weeks

• Brief behavioral couples therapy over six sessions

• Adjunct to substance abuse counseling

• Stand alone intervention is an option

• Children are not included in sessions

• History of severe partner physical aggression is an exclusion criteria (Fals-Stewart, O'Farrell & Birchler, 2004, p.32)

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## BCT Goals

BCT and family-based treatments for substance abuse in general have three primary objectives:

• To eliminate abusive drinking and drug abuse

• To engage the family's support for the patient's efforts to change

• To restructure couple and family interaction patterns in ways conducive to long-term, stable abstinence (Fals-Stewart, O'Farrell & Birchler, 2004, p.31)

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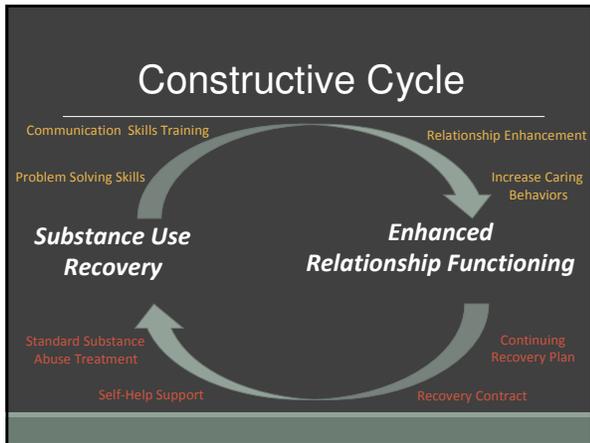
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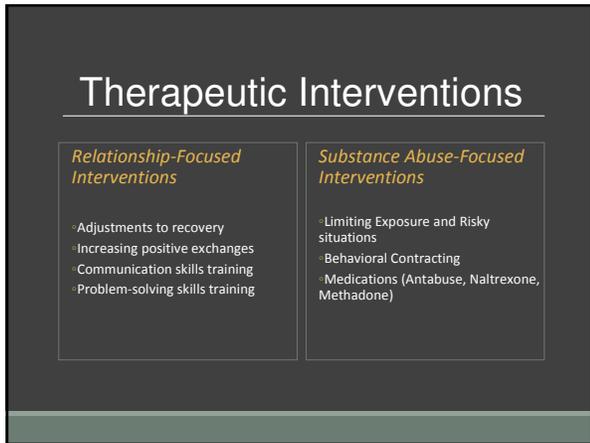
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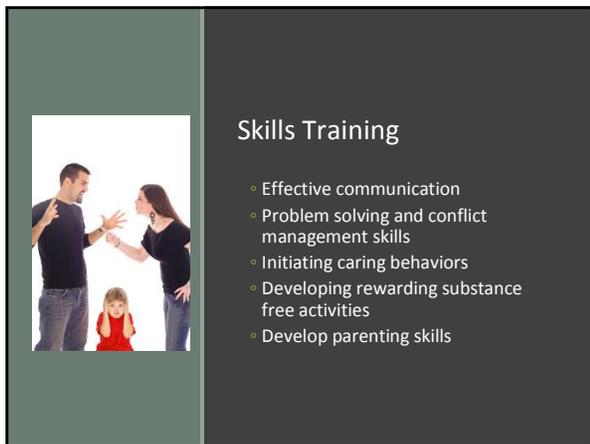
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## The Therapist

- Recovery contract
- Validation, step-wise guidance and encouragement
- Clear and defined expectations
- Effective control of volatile expression



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## Expected Outcomes



- Reduced substance abuse (directly and through restructuring the dysfunctional couple interactions that frequently help sustain it)
- Reversal of destructive cycle

- Confidence, skills sets and stability should be reached regarding substance misuse and supportive relationship quality



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## Research Findings

A study involving 75 drug-abusing men and their wives or cohabiting partners, compared the clinical efficacy and cost-effectiveness of three treatment formats:

- Twelve sessions of standard BCT, to both partners, plus 12 sessions of group drug counseling (GDC) featuring session material on 12-step facilitation
- A 12-session group BCT (GBCT), delivered to multiple couples in a group therapy format, plus 12 sessions of GDC
- A 24-session GDC for the male partners only

### RESULTS

Compared to participants assigned to GDC, participants in BCT and GBCT had significantly better substance use and relationship outcomes during a 12-month post-treatment follow-up period

The differences between BCT and GBCT were not significant (Fals-Stewart & Birchler (2002))

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## Research Findings

In a study conducted by Winters et al. (2002), 75 married or cohabiting women with a primary diagnosis of drug abuse were randomly assigned to one of two equally intensive outpatient treatments:

- BCT plus individual-based treatment (a cognitive-behavioral coping skills program)
- Individual behavioral therapy alone

### RESULTS

During the 1-year post-treatment follow-up, women who received BCT had significantly fewer days of substance use, longer periods of continuous abstinence, and higher levels of relationship satisfaction than did participants who received individual behavioral treatment.

The findings were very similar to those obtained in BCT studies with male substance-abusing patients (Winters et al., 2002)

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## Training Opportunities

Training opportunities and resources are available from:

- Elizabeth E. Epstein, Rutgers University, bepstein@rci.rutgers.edu
- Barbara McCrady, University New Mexico, bmcCrady@unm.edu
- Timothy J. O'Farrell, Harvard Medical School, timothy\_ofarrell@hms.harvard.edu
- Christopher Barrick, Research Institute on Addictions, barrick@ria.buffalo.edu

Training Videos:

- McCrady, B. S. (2000). Couples therapy for addictions. [In J. Lewis & J. Carlson (producers), Brief therapy for addictions. Mill Valley, CA: Psychotherapy.Net
- Institute for Research, Education, and Training in Addiction. (2006). Behavioral Couples Therapy in Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Treatment web-based training. ([www.ireta.org](http://www.ireta.org) under distance learning courses)

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## Questions



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## References

Fals-Stewart, W., Birchler, G.R. (2002). Behavioral couples therapy for alcoholic men and their intimate partners: The comparative effectiveness of bachelor's- and master's-level counselors. *Behavior Therapy*, 33(1), 123-147.

Fals-Stewart, W., O'Farrell, T.J., Birchler, G.R. (2004). Behavioral couples therapy for substance abuse: Rationale, methods, and findings. *Science and Practice Perspectives*, 2(2), 30-41.

Gurman, A.S. (2008). *Clinical handbook of couple therapy*. (4<sup>th</sup> ed). New York: The Guilford Press.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). *Substance Use Disorders*. Retrieved from <http://www.samhsa.gov/disorders/substance-use>.

Winters, J., Fals-Stewart, W., O'Farrell, T.J., Birchler, G.R., Kelley, M.L. (2002). Behavioral Couples Therapy for Female Substance-Abusing Patients: Effects on Substance Use and Relationship Adjustment. *Journal of Consulting Clinical Psychology*, 70(2), 344-55.