



## **Recommended Structure of a Couples Therapy Session: Seven Parts**

***I am going to suggest a general approach with seven parts for structuring couples therapy sessions.*** I do not mean this to be rigid or lock step, but a broad general outline. This structure has come from our research with brief interventions designed to obtain only proximal change in marriage. In these experiments, our goal is only to change the second of two conversations a couple has with a brief intervention. Then we ask couples how they have understood the intervention and what they would take from it. We then monitor the couple for two years and study\_ e relapse (or non-relapse).

Our brief marriage experiments have been quite surprising to us. The structure of these experiments is that the couple has two 15-minute conversations with an intervention between them. Perusing the marital interaction literature, six minutes is the minimum length of time that it is possible to obtain a reliable sample of a couple's conversation in research. Our intervention often lasts only about 20 to 30 minutes, although in some recent experiments the intervention is our psycho-educational workshop or a part of the workshop. In many cases, a couple's interaction changes quite dramatically following a brief intervention. The challenge then becomes getting these changes to last.

Even very simple control group interventions often have quite a large effect on the next conversation. For example, in one of our interventions the couple does nothing but read magazines for a half hour in between the two conversations. We see a significant drop in heart rate following this intervention and a much more productive second conversation. The effect is dramatic compared to letting them talk for a full half hour and not interrupting them.

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