

# In or Out?

## *Treating the mixed-agenda couple*

**By William Doherty**

*Nothing can sink the heart of a couples therapist faster, no matter how battle-tested and savvy, than the mixed-agenda, half-in/half-out duo: spouse A wants desperately to save the marriage, while spouse B is already*

busy planning a postdivorce life. The trouble starts almost immediately. Doing what you think is your best first-session work, you point to issues they could work on, but the "leaning-out" partner slinks down further in his/her chair. You try your best empathizing with that partner's hopelessness, whereupon the "leaning-in" partner, sensing you, too, are giving up on the marriage, dissolves into sobs. Soon the session degenerates into blaming and defensiveness, or pleading and cold distance. At the end of this most unedifying hour, you offer a follow-up appointment, half-hoping they won't come back. You need the business, but not this kind of business.

When you bring the case to your consultation group, your colleagues give you an analysis of the couple's dynamic, but nothing concrete about what to do. They say you can't save every marriage (and that you shouldn't see that as your job), that when spouse A has made up his/her mind to leave spouse B, you just have to accept the decision, and that the leaning-in spouse had probably been guilty of ignoring the problems until it was too late, anyway. You tried, but it didn't work. The marriage was already DOA when the couple got to your office. All in all, it isn't your fault. Still, you wonder if there wasn't a better way for you to have handled this marital emergency-room visit.

Not that it necessarily gets any better if the couple surprises you by coming back for more sessions; they're just inviting you to get deeply enmeshed in their polarized dance. While never signing up to look seriously at him/herself or make real changes in attitude, the leaning-out partner nonetheless can now check the "tried marriage counseling" box on the good-divorce task list and walk away with a clear conscience. The leaning-in partner, desperately trying to get something going for the marriage, alternates between abject apologies, righteous scolding, and lectures about God's will for marriage, the decline of the family, and the end of Western civilization as we know it. At this point, you don't know whether you're their marriage counselor, their divorce counselor, or an individual counselor to one or both of them. You try to resist your nontherapeutic urge to declare a plague on both their houses.

This "couples therapy" generally peters out within a few sessions. (In my research, the typical divorcing couple with children has had four marriage-counseling sessions, just enough to feel they've "tried.") It's now time for termination, divorce counseling, or individual therapy for the partner who's been left. When you process the case again with your colleagues, you're likely to hear the old saw that you can't work harder than your clients and a reminder that your job is to help couples

who really want help.

Yet there may be something about this pat formulation that bothers you. For one thing, it means that you may be consigning an awful lot of couples to the divorce courts. From my practice experience and conversations with therapists around the country, I estimate that at least 30 percent of couples present with different agendas about whether to try to save the marriage or move toward divorce. Surprisingly common, this clinical presentation still has no name and has garnered little attention. Although there's a smattering of clinical literature—including chapters by prominent therapists in a 1989 book edited by John Crosby, titled *When One Wants Out and the Other Doesn't*—we don't have a collective body of workable strategies for this kind of couple. But the stakes are high: mixed-agenda couples make decisions that alter their lives and those of their children forever, and as therapists, we're each making it up as we go along.

Why isn't the mixed agenda-couple addressed systematically in our clinical models? It's partly because our best clinical models are developed in research settings today, where you don't waste resources (and the chance to show that your model is effective) on couples in which one partner has a lawyer on speed dial and is highly skeptical about trying your therapy. When I read this literature, I see caveats that the model applies to situations when both parties are interested in working on their marriage instead of looking for the exit. The older clinical models came from brilliant clinicians who may have mainly attracted couples motivated to take advantage of seeing a well-known therapist. Either way, clinical leaders don't talk or write much about working with ambivalent couples for whom the first presenting issue is conflict over whether even to try therapy.

True, I've known some highly skilled therapists who've developed their own effective ways of working with mixed-agenda couples, and I've incorporated some of their approaches into my own work, but their practices haven't been disseminated in the field. Instead, the average couples therapist often makes a fundamental mistake over and over: doing the first phase of therapy the same way for couples motivated to work on their relationships that they do for couples with conflicting agendas about divorce. As a result, most therapists don't have a systematic way to work with couples when the survival of their marriage is on the line.

In the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project, I've been working almost exclusively with mixed-agenda couples for the past few years, and have developed a detailed protocol to help me and other therapists do more systematic work. The protocol helps therapists avoid three common mistakes in work with leaning-out and leaning-in spouses. Have no doubt: I've made all these mistakes over a 33-year career.

### **Mistake #1. Pursuing the Distancer**

Ambivalent Al appears in your office along with Desperate Diane to perform the American predivorce rite of trying couples therapy. In truth, Al may not be completely sure he wants a divorce—research shows that people go back and forth on this decision—but he's even less sure he wants therapy to repair the relationship. Meanwhile, Diane sees this first session as the last chance to save the marriage. You work hard to coax Al into using therapy to try to save the marriage, thereby executing the misbegotten strategy of pursuing a distancer—and

replicating the marital dynamic, to boot. Al either declines to reschedule or passively agrees to “try” couples therapy. After a handful of going-nowhere sessions, he declares the therapy a failure, or he continues in therapy until Diane gives up in frustration and is forced to take responsibility for starting the divorce process.

### **Mistake #2: Siding with the Distancer**

Here you do join with the leaning-out partner’s reasons for leaving, but unfortunately don’t equally connect with the leaning-in partner’s passion to save the marriage. Trained as we are in sniffing out pathology, we often see good reasons why this marriage is on life support, and correctly note that it will take dedicated effort by two motivated people to turn things around. Since this motivation is lacking in one party, there’s no contract for couples therapy. This analysis pleases the leaning-out partner, but devastates the other partner. The therapist feels the rejected partner’s pain, but offers no hope, and even adds salt to the wound by reminding him or her that in a no-fault divorce state, it takes just one party to end a marriage. At the end of the session, there’s emotional blood on the floor, some of it inevitable, given the stakes, but some coming from the therapist’s mistake of siding with the bolter and bailing too soon on the believer’s hopes that the marriage can be saved.

I recall a couple in which the demoralized wife was stuck about whether to work on the marriage or move on with her life, and the husband got her to come to a couples session. At the end of the first session, I told them that I could do marriage counseling or divorce counseling, whichever they decided they wanted, but I needed a direction. The leaning-in husband was quietly agitated, the wife sullen. They couldn’t agree on a direction during the intervening week, and didn’t return. My need for immediate clarity trumped their need for time and help deciding on a direction. And I offered no hope. They’re on my short list of former clients I want to look up in the great therapy afterlife and say, “I’m sorry.”

### **Mistake #3: Doing Couples Sessions Only**

This mistake doesn’t seem obvious. Why not just keep seeing the couple together and facilitate their communication in therapy about the decision about whether to split up or work on their marriage? For starters, each person has to decide independently whether to move toward divorce or work on the marriage; one can’t decide for the other, and “giving in” leads to nothing good. Whether to stay and work on the marriage is a personal decision best pursued in individual conversations with the two parties, along with carefully facilitated couple-level conversations. Doing traditional couples therapy invites too much risk and vulnerability if you invite the partners to share everything they think and feel in front of the other. In my experience, leaning-out spouses are reluctant to share how little sexual attraction they’ve felt for years, or how they doubt that they ever really loved their mate. Leaning-in spouses fear alienating the other even more if they vent their rage about being the fall guy or their humiliation about being cheated on. In addition, only seeing both partners together in the room can lead either to excruciating disclosures with little immediate chance for healing or to withholding and paralysis, after which someone announces that therapy isn’t working. I know a few therapists who can pull off this high-wire act, managing so much polarization and reactivity without losing either partner, but not many. I used to have my successes and failures with a couples-only approach, but have stopped because I discovered a less risky and more productive way to proceed.

The turning point for me was a workshop given by the prominent family therapist Betty Carter in the early 1990s. I heard her describe how she worked with polarized partners separately and together on their differing goals—working with one to clarify the feelings about divorce versus staying in the marriage, and working with the other to try to save the marriage—and how she shuttled back and forth between individual and joint conversations. Without her experience to rely on, I don't know if I'd have been brave enough to try this approach. I wouldn't have believed that couples would accept a counterintuitive way of helping two people with seemingly incompatible goals. In fact, however, couples accept it well—as long as they don't have to sit there and listen to the other person agonize. Starting from Carter's approach, I developed an informal way of working with mixed-agenda couples that I've used for nearly 20 years. It's a protocol I call Discernment Counseling. Here's the guts of the approach.

### **Discernment in Theory**

When one or both of the partners are reluctant to try to salvage the relationship in therapy, I propose this counseling as a short-term process with the goal of achieving greater clarity about whether to try to restore the marriage or to continue toward divorce. I don't frame the immediate decision as whether to divorce or stay married for life, but whether to carve out a six-month period of all-out effort to restore the marriage to health, with divorce off the table during that time. At the end of six months, they can put the divorce decision back on the table, based on what they've learned about the possibility of successfully rebuilding their marriage.

Many experienced therapists use a similar approach of recommending a number of sessions of therapy before a final decision on the marriage. But I've learned to be cautious about a quick decision to try couples therapy from the leaning-out spouse; the result often is halfhearted therapy. Instead, I suggest slowing down and spending time (up to five sessions if necessary) to explore which path to take. I want to avoid both precipitous decisions to divorce and precipitous decisions to try reconciliation.

A central strategy of this work is that although the couple comes in together each time, most of the work goes on in separate conversations with each spouse. In the first 40 minutes of the initial session, I see them together and get both their stories and perspectives on the marriage. After asking what they hope to get from seeing me, I inquire about their divorce narratives (how they got to this point), their repair narratives (how they tried to solve their problems and what outside help they sought), and a question about the best of times in their relationship history. I then spend more than an hour seeing each of them separately. During that time, I focus on each one's agenda (leaving or saving the marriage, along with other agendas) and try to open up a deeper understanding of each one's contributions to the marital dynamics and areas of potential change. At the end of each individual conversation, I help the partner prepare a summary to be shared with the other partner at the end of the session.

The last 10 to 15 minutes is with the couple, beginning with each sharing what they took from our individual conversation. Often leaning-out spouses will say that they got some more insight into their contributions to the problems and are willing to return for another Discernment Counseling session, and leaning-in spouses will

focus on the personal changes they want to work on in the coming days. We end with my feedback on their relationship story, with a focus on what's possible to change, if they both decide to work on the marriage all-out for six months. We then decide about rescheduling.

A central tenet of this way of working and the main way of avoiding doomed, halfhearted couples therapy is that I don't claim to be doing couples therapy until I have an informed agreement with both partners to work on the marriage. That way, if a leaning-out partner says that the "marriage counseling isn't working," I can point out that they haven't tried marriage counseling yet: Discernment Counseling is helping them decide whether to try marriage counseling. I tell them it's like taking an antibiotic, in that you can't say that the antibiotic isn't helping if you haven't taken it yet. We're working on a decision about whether to try the medication, or let the disease take its course. It's important that Discernment Counseling be a short-term process, or else it will seem like endless couples therapy.

I didn't always have a name for this process; sometimes I'd call it "decision-making counseling," or "premarriage counseling," or "ambivalence counseling." I now see an advantage to have a formal name that communicates to clients that there's a structure to the process that's distinct from the structure of couples therapy. The name came out of my work with a group of collaborative divorce lawyers who wanted to refer clients to something that didn't sound like marriage counseling of the kind that hadn't worked for these couples in the past. They wanted it to sound neutral about the couple's final direction, and sending them to a discernment process didn't imply that they should try to avoid divorce.

Discernment Counseling creates a holding environment for mixed-agenda couples where both partners can bring their best selves to this crisis in their marriage. I help the leaning-out partners of the marriage in a more complex way that helps reveal their own contribution to the problems. For leaning-out partners who've been dealing with abuse, ongoing affairs, or other serious irresponsibility from their partners, I help them firm up their resolve to change the intolerable situation. Leaning-in partners get to do something constructive other than wait for the other to decide the fate of the marriage: they can make constructive changes in themselves to try to reboot the marriage. I've been amazed at how much challenge leaning-in partners will accept from me in Discernment Counseling because they know I want to help them pull their marriage out of the fire.

### **Discernment in Action**

Jennifer and Michael came in a demoralized state after Jennifer had discovered that Michael was still having contact with a former coworker with whom he'd had an emotional affair—secret meetings and long, personal talks about Michael's marriage and other things, but no sex. Jennifer saw a divorce lawyer to learn about collaborative divorce, and the lawyer referred the couple to me. Michael said he felt lifeless in the marriage, with no attraction for Jennifer and a feeling that he should stay married to her out of duty to their four young children. After three efforts during their 15 years of marriage, he was down on marital therapy. They'd been to nice counselors and had made some progress in learning how to communicate, but otherwise therapy had been a downhill trajectory. Michael felt like the junior partner to a senior-manager wife who gave him orders, and didn't

see a future for the marriage. Jennifer was furious about the affair, but wanted to work on the marriage. If Michael's bent was to retreat into despairing passivity, hers was to push him to confront his ambivalence, commit to ending the relationship with the other woman, and work on being a full partner with her.

When I learned this basic information with each of them separately on the phone, I offered Discernment Counseling, rather than a first session of marital therapy. Michael opened up more in the individual conversation than in the initial couples time, telling me he felt he'd entered the marriage on a rebound from a turbulent romance with another woman, and had chosen Jennifer as someone safe. What he didn't realize was how "controlling" she'd turn out to be, especially after they'd had children. He mainly let her have her own way, giving himself over to his work and to being a good father, but something inside was dying, and his friendship with a coworker made him feel alive as a man again. It showed him how unhappy he was at home. Prior therapy had felt like plodding through "communication issues," with no real change in their dynamic as a couple, and he felt that he was being cast as the bad guy for not being a more emotionally open partner.

This was a classic presentation from a man in a declining marriage who'd been through the wringer of couples therapy a few times. Michael was pessimistic about trying more therapy, not only because of past failures, but because he now believed that he and Jennifer simply weren't compatible. They were both good people, he said, but no longer good for each other.

As the Discernment Counselor, my first stance was to listen and empathize with his loneliness and hopelessness, and then to try to understand how he got into the emotional affair and what he'd learned from it. That's the compassion part of Discernment Counseling. The other part is expanding the divorce narrative to include personal contributions to the problems. I worked to help him see that he hadn't been a passive victim of an overbearing wife, but had participated fully in creating their parent-adolescent dynamic. Having an emotional affair was a temporary safety-valve release from the marital pressure, but it was ultimately bound to distance him more and elicit more emotional pursuit and attempts at control from Jennifer.

Discernment Counseling is all about helping both parties own their own contributions to the marital problems before deciding to exit a failing marriage, and opening up a possible reconciliation narrative they might create together. Leaning-out spouses accept the challenge of self-examination more readily when I'm seeing them one on one and not pushing them to work on the marriage. Ironically, when hopeless spouses like Michael see their own contributions more clearly, they sometimes feel more hopeful instead of more despairing. You can't change your partner, I point out, but you can change yourself, and that might change things in the marriage.

So as not to lean too hard on preserving the marriage, I then frame the benefits of working on self, whether or not the marriage endures. After all, partners will bring these personal challenges—problems with boundaries, assertiveness, attachment, or sexuality—into their next relationships, probably with the added complications of stepfamily life. The question becomes whether to do the needed work on oneself in this marriage with these kids and in this family, or to do the work in future relationships. You can't divorce yourself, I say; you take yourself with you into

every new relationship.

Michael was receptive to looking at himself, but kept returning to the incompatibility theme. Jennifer and he were too different in their needs and temperaments, he said, and he couldn't be the person she was asking him to be. These days, many clients have learned they shouldn't say "my spouse is a jerk," but "we're just too different as individuals to make a marriage work"—either from the beginning, or because "we've grown in different directions." This has a conveniently no-bad-guys flavor, which divorcing celebrities trumpet in the press when they announce that they've remained the best of friends.

Couples therapists inevitably bring their own values and perspectives to these cases. After 40 years of marriage and 33 years as a marital therapist, my own view of incompatibility is that it's much overrated. Every couple is incompatible if you dig deeply enough. I believe that people who once fell in love, made a lifetime commitment, and bore children together don't divorce because of their differences, but because of *how they deal with their differences* over the years. We choose to accentuate our differences, real and imagined; it doesn't just happen to us. You can bring a perfectly good marriage to its knees in a year or two by deciding personal differences—which didn't seem so objectionable before—are intolerable. Short of flagrant pathology, we can make healthy choices to work with the differences between us and our lifemates. That's what I told Michael, and it was enough to intrigue him into staying with the Discernment Counseling process.

With Jennifer alone, the compassion part of the process involved listening to her pain about Michael's emotional affair and her frustration at carrying on with a partner who'd been checked out for many years. As with most leaning-in spouses, her focus was on her partner and her tools for getting him to shift course—by being affectionate (which wasn't reciprocated), scolding (that had predictable results), or aloof (which could send a message that she didn't care). Because Jennifer mostly wanted to talk about Michael, my job was to get her to look at herself as an actor in this marital crisis. Depending on how open the leaning-in spouse is to self-exploration, the focus can be on only the immediate behaviors that are making things worse or on his or her overall role in creating problems in the marriage. Jennifer was frantic enough in the first session that she could only focus on her role in the current crisis.

I assume a coaching role with these hopeful spouses, helping them stop pursuing through too much affection or bouts of criticism, while not distancing and rejecting. I can be quite challenging with the leaning-in spouse, something they let me do because I identify with their goal of saving the marriage. I suggested to Jennifer that the best thing for her to do while Michael was trying to figure out his own decision was to work on her personal boundaries and anxiety management. She struggled with what I said, but had to agree since it was obvious that her way wasn't working.

At the end of the first session, Michael reported that he'd had some new insights about his role in the marital problems and previous counseling, and that he was willing to continue the Discernment Counseling. Jennifer focused on what she was going to work on to handle her anxiety and not push him for a commitment. The subsequent three sessions followed a similar format, but with much more individual time: a brief check-in as a couple, then work with each separately, and a

couple check-out. I continued to work on the themes of the first session, keeping the focus on the decision of whether to try to reconcile or move toward divorce. With Michael, I talked more about his affair partner, and he came to realize that he'd have to cut off contact with her if he chose the reconciliation path. I told Jennifer that this was part of my discussion with Michael, so that she didn't have to keep repeating her expectation that he end the affair if he wanted to work on the marriage.

### **Whether Couples Therapy Follows**

The culminating moment in our work came when Michael told me that, although he now understood intellectually that there were good reasons to try to reconcile, his heart just wasn't in it: he didn't really "want" Jennifer as a husband should want a wife. He had no desire for her romantically, no sexual passion. It would be faking it to continue together under these circumstances. I tried standard therapist lines, such as the value of trying the behavior first (acting loving and romantic) and seeing whether the feelings came back. I talked about love being a decision, a choice, and not a mysterious force outside of our volition. I made an analogy to times when we don't feel much spontaneous love for our teenagers, but we dig deep and hang in there with them until our parental affection resurrects. Michael politely told me that he'd thought of all of this (other therapists had tried these approaches), but at the end of the day, he didn't see how he could make use of couples therapy if he had no feelings of desire to draw on.

I've developed a question for situations like this, which requires a careful and dramatic setup. I said, "I'm going to ask you something now that I'd like you to think about before answering." Then I asked slowly and deliberately, "Do you *want* to want Jennifer? Do you *want* to want to have feelings for her? If I could take a magic wand out of this desk drawer and grant you the wish that you'd love and desire your wife, would you *want* to be granted that wish?" After Michael was speechless for the first time in our work, I told him that this was too important a question to answer right away if he was uncertain. Would he be willing to think about it before our next session? He wrote the question down. In the couple check-out, he tearfully told Jennifer that this was a question he wanted to do soul searching on because it seemed so important. Jennifer's boundaries were intact enough by this point for her to listen to him with compassion, putting aside her hurt that the question required him to think so hard. The next day, Michael e-mailed me that he realized he very much wanted to want Jennifer, and would like to begin the reconciliation work. He didn't shift overnight, but Michael did commit to the work of changing himself so that he could love Jennifer again.

Other times in Discernment Counseling, couples decide not to pursue reconciliation in couples therapy, and end up divorcing in a better place. In one case, the couple had been separated after the husband's affair, but had remained in almost daily contact for a year. He often ate dinner with his wife and the kids, and did family activities on weekends. She'd talked to a divorce lawyer, but had put the divorce on hold. He'd initiated Discernment Counseling through his lawyer's referral in order to save the marriage—a rare initiative on his part, which impressed his wife and gave her hope. But he remained ambivalent about changing his dysfunctional relationship with alcohol—he'd had a DWI and had nearly lost his professional license—and accepting responsibility for endangering the marriage through his affair. He told me he was "not going to crawl back home on my knees asking for

forgiveness"; the sex in his marriage had been bad for years, and his wife was part of that problem.

Over three discernment sessions, the leaning-out wife came to see her role in the distance they'd created in the marriage, but I supported her view that her husband needed to show that he was stepping up to accept responsibility and work on serious change if they were to have a chance at a healthy marriage. He never did.

They stopped Discernment Counseling, but the wife came back to me after several months. She wanted my feedback on her decision to restart the divorce process. I supported her sense that her husband apparently was unwilling to take the major steps needed to save the marriage; in fact, he seemed to be going in the opposite direction. I accepted her sense that it was time for her to give up hope for a successful reconciliation, and aim instead for continued good coparenting. I affirmed her long, hard effort to avoid this outcome—important now and in the future, when she, like other leaning-out spouses, would be asked by their children why they'd ended the marriage.

At the end of the session, I told her that if her husband got in touch with me to debrief about what happened, I'd tell him what I told her, and I'd see whether this impending divorce might motivate him to work on his problems. However, I assured her that I wouldn't try to create pressure on her to change her mind about the divorce. (I was worried about another round of his last-ditch but halfhearted efforts to avoid divorce.) "Who knows what he might become in a few years if he gets serious about his problems," I said. "He's the father of your children, and if he changes for the better, that's a good thing. You can always make other decisions later about your relationship with him, but for now, you know what you have to do." When Discernment Counseling ends with at least one partner having clarity and confidence about divorcing, and in commitment to good coparenting, I consider it a success.

The most successful divorcing cases are those in which both parties have come to see their marital narrative in a more complex way, each a coauthor and not just a character in a script handed to them. The healing power of Discernment Counseling for couples who divorce stems from the absence of pressure to change the marriage, the expanded narrative of the marriage that it yields, the individual work on self-differentiation, and the carefully orchestrated sharing the couple does at the end of sessions. By going through this crucible, the couple acquires a deeper, richer level of knowledge about their relationship and the problems they faced that they couldn't resolve in the end. In Discernment Counseling, the only failure is not to have learned anything.

For mixed-agenda couples who decide to embark on a journey of reconciliation, I've found the subsequent couples therapy to be more focused and intense because of our time in Discernment Counseling. The couples therapy is front-loaded with a different agenda that we've developed together. This agenda not only includes directly clinical material, but may result in agreement on drawing on other resources, including alcohol assessment, financial counseling, a couples retreat weekend, or a return to a psychiatrist for a medication evaluation. In other words, we negotiate a full-bore reconciliation plan; we don't just drift into therapy. This may be their last best chance to restore the marriage: it's all-hands-on-deck time. As the weeks and therapy sessions go by, all three of us know whether we're

on a healing trajectory, or whether the reconciliation effort isn't gaining traction. Surprises seldom appear at the six-month mark, but the couples who've been in Discernment Counseling are likelier to give couples therapy a genuinely good try, not a halfhearted effort.

The big blind spot for many couples therapists is forgetting that there are always two commitment issues on the table whenever we start working with a couple: their commitment to each other, and their commitment to healing their relationship in therapy. In other words, the issues are whether they're going to stay together, and whether they're going to work together on the marriage. Mixed-agenda couples come to us emotionally raw, holding tickets for different destinations for their marriage, often having said dreadful things to each other, feeling like failures in past couples therapy, dealing with third parties who are lining up to take sides, and fearing both the unknown abyss of divorce and the slow death of a miserable marriage. With so much at stake, we owe them more than fumbling approaches that ignore the realities of what they're confronting.

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