What is Couple Therapy for Depression?

Couple Therapy for Depression is a version of couple therapy that has been developed to help people suffering from mild to moderate depression where there are also difficulties in the relationship. It is designed to help people with their relationship and the emotional difficulties that sometimes flow from problems between partners. It is an ‘evidence-based’ therapy as research has shown that this kind of couple therapy works. There are other types of talking therapies that can help individuals suffering from anxiety and depression.

Depression
People who are depressed often find their relationships suffer and sometimes problems in the relationship can lead to one or other partner becoming depressed or anxious. Couple Therapy for Depression deals with both the depression and the relationship distress.

Depression can affect people in lots of different ways. Typical symptoms are:

- loss of interest and enjoyment in ordinary things
- feeling tired, tearful and irritable
- wanting to be alone
- loss of interest in sex
- not being able to sleep
- loss of appetite
- not being able to concentrate
- not feeling worthy of love or of loving

These symptoms often come with feelings of guilt, worthlessness and low self-esteem, along with loss of confidence and feelings of helplessness, all of which can have an effect on the quality of close relationships. Talking therapy is an effective treatment for mild to moderate depression.

Couple Therapy
People might benefit from couple therapy for many different reasons. It may be that the relationship has broken down or that there is anxiety that it might. Sustaining a fulfilling and stable relationship is never easy. Pressures from work, money, children, family tensions and ill health can all contribute to creating problems and these problems can lead to depression and other difficulties for one or both partners. Sometimes couples can’t talk to each other and meeting
with a couple therapist can open the way to better communication which is a key part of improving relationships. Couple therapy aims to help you to achieve:

- Recovery from depression
- Better communication and ability to work together
- Greater awareness of each of your needs
- Greater understanding of your partner and yourself, and of the differences between you
- A better sense of closeness between the two of you
- Being less stuck in repeating patterns in your relationships
- Help with feelings of anxiety and stress in facing the challenges of your relationship and family life
- Help with coming to terms with life changes such as the arrival of children, bereavement or separation
- A more stable family life
- Greater confidence about the future
- An improved sexual relationship if this is needed

**How does it work?**

Couple Therapy helps those who are suffering from depression by reducing the kinds of things that make partners feel alone and distressed, or which push partners apart and makes you feel angry with each other. It improves your relationship by helping you both to work together on the things that create unhappiness and to move on from stuck and sometimes hostile patterns of interaction. It helps you to understand each other at an emotional level as well as a practical one (how you feel and what you do). It gives you skills as well as understanding. This can lead to a happier and more fulfilling relationship in which differences between you are not so problematic. This relieves depression which in turn improves your relationship. This positive cycle improves mood and emotional wellbeing.

**What does couple therapy involve?**

Everyone’s therapy will be a bit different but couple therapy aims to help you and your partner explore and understand more about your difficulties, and then find solutions to them. Working together with a couple therapist, you will talk about the issues that trouble you and your partner. Together, you will explore new ways to relate to each other, gaining a greater understanding of your own and your partner’s feelings, and learning communication and problem-solving skills if needed. Couple therapists know that depression can affect how people behave as well as how they feel, and they help couples to regain previous strengths as well as develop new ones.

**Starting off**

Couple therapists help each of you feel respected and they will create a setting in which you both feel comfortable to talk. Your couple therapist knows that starting therapy and having to talk openly with your partner about problems can be difficult – particularly when one of you is depressed – and they will try to
understand what life is like for you and your partner. You will each have a session on your own with the couple therapist at the beginning of the therapy, so that you can explore things in a little more depth.

Your couple therapist will work with you to get a good picture of what you and your partner are finding difficult in your relationship and how this is affecting you both. As well as trying to understand your background (the kinds of things that have made you who you are now) they will give each of you space to talk about how you feel and think, and about the kinds of things that each of you does now that can upset your partner. Sometimes your couple therapist may suggest ways for your partner and you to improve your communication or to solve problems that you might be facing and this may involve some tasks to do between the therapy sessions. Mostly, however, they will be interested in helping the two of you understand and resolve the problems you are having.

**Explaining how couple therapy might work for you**

Early on your couple therapist should explain how the approach works, and help you to think about how it might help you and your partner. They will want to make sure that this is the right approach for you and that you and your partner are committed to undertaking the therapy. Generally, the first four meetings with the couple therapist are designed to clarify the problems that you are facing and the different ways that you approach them. In the fourth session, the couple therapist will sum-up the discussions and outline what the therapy will aim to do. Your input here is very important and you will be asked what you want from the therapy.

**What can you expect of your couple therapist?**

Your couple therapist is responsible for ensuring that your sessions take place at a regular time, in a setting where you can be sure of confidentiality. Your couple therapist will not take sides, though they may sometimes feel challenging to one or other of you. They will point out things that go on between you that you might not be very aware of, but which make your relationship less satisfying than it could be. They will help you understand the ways that depression affects both of you, and how it is connected to the distress in your relationship. They will make links between ways that you have been brought-up and what you expect from a relationship, and they will build on the strengths that you already have as a couple.

**Length and frequency of therapy**

There may be some variation in the number of sessions of you are offered according to the way your local service is run. For Couple Therapy for Depression to be effective for most people you should have between 15-20 sessions of couple therapy over a period of six months or so. In most NHS services it is likely that you will be seen once a week for about 50-60 minutes. In some cases sessions may be offered on a less frequent basis, for example fortnightly rather than weekly. There should be a clear agreement between you
and your couple therapist on these arrangements. Some couples will find they require fewer sessions and some will require more, but no therapy should just stop the moment you feel better; there has to be a process of ending.

**Ending Couple Therapy**

Your couple therapist should be clear about the number of sessions available and when the therapy will end. Just as the therapy began with getting to know you both and agreeing what the aims of the therapy were, the end of the therapy has a very specific task: to build on what you have achieved to make sure you can avoid future episodes of depression and distress. This will take about 3 sessions. They will want to know how you feel about ending and give you and your partner time to talk about this. Your couple therapist will also help you both look to the future and think about the changes you have made. This will include thinking about how you will recognize when things are slipping, and help you plan how you deal with any further problems and challenges once you have finished the therapy.