

Working with Remarried Couples

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Please note that this article was written for therapists working with remarried couples. However, many divorced individuals decide not to legally marry a second (or third) time and “repartner” instead. Repartnered couples (cohabitating couples with at least one partner who has been divorced) have many of the same stressors as remarried couples and therapists may find the suggestions in this article useful for repartnered clients.

Remarried couples account for approximately 43% of all marriages (NSRC, 2009). Sadly, the divorce rate for remarried couples is higher than the divorce rate of first-married couples, with many remarriages not lasting through the second year (Bray, 2008). In general, remarried couples have less marital satisfaction and tend to be more critical than first-married couples (Seccombe & Warner, 2004). Therefore, the likelihood of remarried couples seeking couples’ counseling is high. Many couple therapists assume that remarried couples are identical to first-married couples and utilize the same interventions for both. However, remarried couples can fail to progress in therapy if therapists fail to take into account the unique aspects of remarried couples and modify their interventions accordingly (Bray, 2008).

Loss of Love with 3 Unique Stressors

According to Harley (2003), remarried couples “tend to lose their love for each other much quicker than [first-married] couples do” (p. 206). This loss of love is caused by three stressors unique to remarriage relationships.

1. *Set Relational Patterns or “Ghosts”* One problem brought to the marriage by the previous relationship can be set relational patterns (Bray, 2008). In their previous relationships, each spouse learned interaction patterns and these patterns can creep into the new relationship. Bray (2008) calls these patterns “ghosts” because the patterns continue to haunt the individual until the individual takes action against them. The central issue for the “ghosts” is a lack of trust (Brimhall, Wampler, & Kimball, 2008). For example, the husband may have difficulty trusting his new wife because he was cheated on by his previous spouse. His new wife becomes angry with his lack of trust because she knows that she has done nothing to hurt him. A second example is a wife whose previous husband yelled at and berated her whenever she disagreed with him so she learned to withdraw and avoid conflict. This pattern continues in the new relationship because the wife does not trust the new husband to treat her with respect. The new husband cannot understand why she refuses to give her opinion or help him make decisions. Many couples may not have considered that these “ghosts” are even at work in their marriage, so the “ghosts” continue to cause problems for them.
2. *Issues of Loss or Grief.* The second issue that may plague the new marriage is the feeling of loss associated with the previous relationship. Spouses may grieve the loss of their innocent years or feel guilty that they failed (Bray, 2008). A spouse may be grieving the loss of their spouse if the dissolution of the marriage came about because of death. Even if the spouses have had time to grieve their losses, the new marriage may reactivate the grief (NSRC, 2009). The unresolved grief

can cause hostility between the couple and the couple may not even understand the source of the problem.

3. *Issues with Previous Spouses.* Third, remarried couples come into the marriage from previous marital relationships. It is a well-known fact that some ex-spouses seek revenge or create havoc with their previous partners, which can disrupt the freshly formed bond in the new marriage. Former spouses can also be a source of jealousy for the current spouse which puts more strain on the new relationship (Seccombe & Warner, 2004). This jealousy can stem from the fact that the former spouse has a relationship with the partner of which the current spouse is not a part. Also many individuals contend that their partners have problems setting boundaries for their former spouses. This issue can be especially stressful if the previous spouse is actively co-parenting children with the remarried spouse.

Expectations for Remarriage

There are two types of unfortunate expectations to the remarriage: **unrealistic expectations** and **uncommunicated expectations** (Bray, 2008).

Couples with **unrealistic expectations** have the highest divorce rate among remarried couples. One or both partners may have the fantasy that their marriage will be perfect like the Brady Bunch with everyone getting along like a biological family. They expect that because they love their new spouses, they will also immediately love the spouses' children or vice versa (McCubbin & Figley, 1983; NSRC, 2009). However, spouses may find that their step-children behave in a way that makes them difficult to love. Spouses with these unrealistic expectations often become resentful when their expectations are not met. Some spouses may recognize that relationships take time to develop and grow. Nevertheless, they may become upset if they feel enough time has passed and the new family is not getting along. Many individuals fail to realize that step-families are complex entities that take up to four years to form bonds (NSRC, 2009).

Uncommunicated expectations also cause problems in the new marriage. Falke and Larson (2007) found that satisfaction with the remarriage depended upon the couple coming to an agreement on finances, discipline of the children, and the role each spouse will take in the marriage. Other research shows that the main reasons remarried couples gave for divorce were disagreements over communication, the amount of affection received, how to handle disputes, and child discipline (Benson-von der Ohe, 1987). Most individuals enter the marriage with predetermined ideas of what they want and how they expect their new spouse to meet those needs. However, remarried couples are less effective at communicating than first-married couples, and most remarried individuals never communicate their expectations to their spouses, which can lead to disagreements and, eventually, divorce (Bray, 2009).

For the Therapist

Bray (2008) posits that remarried couples and first-married couples have different needs. With remarried couples, communication, expectations, ghosts, intimacy, and threats of divorce must be addressed in order for the remarried couple

to benefit from therapy. The therapist should remember that remarried couples are diverse and not all couples will have the same experiences or problems. Some couples may have already worked through

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one or more of the main stressors facing remarried couples, so the treatment plan should be tailored to fit the specific needs of each couple. In addition, if the couple is having specific problems with their children, the strategy paper *Working with Stepfamilies Couples* may be helpful.

- **Communication:**
 - Couples who come in for counseling may be set in a negative communication pattern. It is important for remarried couples to learn how to communicate their expectations and needs to one another in a non-hurtful fashion. This is usually done during communication and conflict resolution interventions such as TANGO and LOVE. Some couples may need extra work on communication such as the Hope interventions (found in the *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling* book by Worthington):
 - 10-2 *Identifying Love Busters*
 - 10-5 *Discerning Languages of Love and Communicating in Ways the Partner Can Understand*

- **Expectations:**
 - Unrealistic Expectations: The therapist should educate the couple on realistic expectations for blended families. The couple should be taught that they are “a different type of family—not better, not worse [than first-married couple], simply different” and that they “can be different and still be healthy” (McCubbin & Figley, 1983, p.142).
 - Uncommunicated Expectations: Assign *Expectations* worksheet as homework if needed. This worksheet has each spouse examine his or her own expectations in several areas including finances, intimacy, and discipline of children. Then the couple is asked to discuss these expectations with each other and to look for areas that may need compromise. Additional suggestions to address core values from the *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling* book:
 - 7-2 (Homework) *Reflecting on Competing Values*
 - 7-3 (Homework) *Discussing Values*
 - 7-4 (Homework) *Reflect on Challenges to Values*

- **Ghosts:**
 - Modify the empty chair technique (as described in the Hope-Focused Manual) so that each spouse addresses the problems experienced with the ex-spouse. This will give the current spouse a better understanding of what the partner has been through and why they may act in a particular way.
 - When examining vulnerability and writing letters of vulnerability (as described in the Hope-Focused Manual) consider using the modified version created for remarried couples.
 - After identifying “ghosts” have the couple practice communicating their true feelings instead of the previous maladaptive way of communicating. With the examples given earlier, the husband might say, “When you weren’t home on time, thoughts of you cheating on me started running through my head. I know you haven’t done anything—I’m just scared.”
 - Encourage spouses to be understanding with their partners’ ghosts. The wife in the first example should praise her husband for opening up and being vulnerable with her. In the second example given earlier with the wife who was reluctant to share her opinions, the husband might say, “I know you have a hard time sharing your opinions on this and I understand if you’d rather not, but I would really value your input.”

- **Intimacy:**
 - Many times the responsibilities of life and the stressors unique to remarriage have come between the couple, so that the couple has grown farther apart.
 - During the CLEAVE session, incorporate exercise 13-10, *Discuss Intimacy* so that individuals have an understanding of their partners' needs.
 - Emphasize the importance of date night. Many couples may try to excuse themselves from date night by explaining that they do not have the time with work responsibilities or because they have children. However, most couples do not have another time during the week when they are alone together and can enjoy each other's company, so this time together is imperative for growing the relationship. In addition, have the couple commit to a specific event on a set day.

- **Threatening Divorce:**
 - Educate the couple on how destructive this tactic is to the marriage. It drives a wedge between the spouses and destroys trust and intimacy (Bray, 2008).
 - Explain that this tactic can be used as a weapon (when they are angry and want to get back at the partner) or as a defense (when they are scared and want to protect themselves).
 - Instruct couples to share feelings instead of threats. ("I'm really angry right now, so maybe we should finish this discussion later" or "What you said really hurt my feelings. It scared me and made me feel unloved.>").
 - Help couples commit to the relationship and each other with 14-3 *Helping Couples Understand Divorce*.
 - Help couples cement commitment to each other with 14-4 *Deal with Commitment Drift*.

Annotated Bibliography

For the Clinician:

Bray, J. H. (2008). Couple therapy with remarried partners. In A. S. Gurman (Ed.), *Clinical handbook of couple therapy* (4th ed., pp.459-477). New York: Guilford Press.

This is a thorough book chapter that examines the recent research and condenses it into a manageable form. The author explains unique stressors to remarried couples and gives advice on how to address these problems. The article also includes an extensive case study where the author explains his methods.

National Stepfamily Resource Center (NSRC, 2009). Retrieved May 6, 2009, from www.stepfamilies.info

This website gives an abundance of information on remarried couples and step-families including research findings and frequently asked questions. The site also has links to numerous articles that give advice to the therapist on how to provide counseling to this population and articles geared for the couple themselves. In addition, the site lists support groups by state.

For the Remarried Couple:

Frisbie, D., & Frisbie, L. (2005). *Happily remarried*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers.

This husband and wife team give the reader four key strategies for making remarriage work. They also give practical advice on topics such as where to live and how to handle the ex-spouses. The book includes a discussion guide for each chapter and a resource section at the end of the book that lists helpful websites and books.

Wisdom, S., & Green, J. (2002). *Step coupling: Creating and sustaining a strong marriage in today's blended family*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

This book was written by two women who have been in successful remarriages for 25 years. They offer practical advice and insight on topics such as expectations, boundaries, and spending time alone together.

[For the Couple with Children:](#)

Cline, F., & Fay, J. (2006). *Parenting with love and logic*. Menasha, WI: NavPress Publishing.

This book explains parenting styles and teaches parents how to use natural consequences to help their children to learn to obey. It gives tips and practical advice on how to implement consequences without becoming emotional or angry.

Cloud, H., & Townsend, J. (2001). *Boundaries with kids*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The authors explain to parents how they can be loving parents and still set limits with their children. This book will help parents take control of their lives and give them practical advice on how to teach their children responsibility.

Phelan, T. W. (2004). *1-2-3 magic: Effective discipline for children 2-12*. Glen Ellyn, IL: Parentmagic, Inc.

Dr. Phelan outlines a three part plan of reducing unwanted behavior, encouraging desired behavior, and strengthening the relationship between children and their parents. He also identifies and gives parents tips on handling the six methods children use to test and manipulate their parents. In addition, he gives advice on how to prevent children from having public temper-tantrums.

References

Benson-von der Ohe, E. (1987). *First and second marriages*. New York: Praeger.

Brimhall, A., Wampler, K., & Kimball, T. (2008). Learning from the past, altering the future: A tentative theory of the effect of past relationships on couples who remarry. *Family Process, 47*, 373-387.

Falke, S. I., & Larson, J. H. (2007). Premarital predictors of remarital quality: Implications for clinicians. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 29*, 9-23.

Harley Jr., W. F. (2003). *His needs, her needs for parents: Keeping romance alive*. Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell.

McCubbin, H. I., & Figley, C. R. (1983). *Stress and the family: Coping with normative transitions (Vol. 1)*. New York: Brunner Mazel Publishers.

Seccombe, K., & Warner, R. L. (2004). *Marriages and families: Relationships in social context*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.