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A Therapeutic Separation

This material is developed as a summary of a concept first introduced by Bruce Fisher in his book, *Rebuilding: When Your Relationship Ends*. This is an excellent book for couples who are facing separation and/or divorce. MFTS uses Therapeutic Separations as a tool for exploring the possibility of marital reconciliation as well as a tool to provide opportunity for the couple to heal the damage from the past so they won't carry it into the future—reconciliation or not.

What is it?

A Therapeutic Separation is an agreement developed between a couple and their therapist, which outlines a specific period of time each will spend living apart from each other. This agreement provides very specific guidelines for the separation, which are developed in concert with the therapist, and usually include participating in both individual and couples therapy. The suggested time period for a therapeutic separation is between 3 months and a year, although no less than 6 months is highly recommended. Less than 3 months does not allow for enough time to receive the full benefits a therapeutic separation potentially can offer. During the agreed-upon time period, the couple agrees to practice “letting go of the outcome” regarding the status of the relationship. This means they agree to take the divorce-option “off the table,” as well as *not* to discuss whether or not reconciliation is likely possible. **This is a crucial aspect of this process**, as without this agreement, a secure therapeutic environment in which to explore the possibilities of healing the past in the relationship is extremely limited.

When is a Therapeutic Separation necessary?

When either spouse finds the continuation of residing in the same quarters unbearable, destructive, or too painful to continue. One may be indicated if the marriage is stuck in a debilitating communication pattern or the couple is painfully withdrawn from each other.

How can it be helpful?

A well-designed Therapeutic Separation can provide space for each Spouse to experience and reflect upon the meaning of the marriage, explore the history of the dysfunctional patterns in the relationship, learn more effective coping and conflict resolution skills, and perhaps develop new ways of relating to one another. During the course of the separation, the couple is given opportunities in therapy to learn and practice new skills which can create a brand new possibility for the relationship, moving forward.

What are the guidelines?

1. Discuss and agree upon functional issues such as: finances, childcare, living arrangements, time with children, etc. The amount and level of contact between spouses also needs to be set. eg: Will it be OK to have extended telephone calls? Dating of each other? Time together as a family? (Use Therapeutic Separation Worksheet to develop all of these agreements.)
2. Emotions are handled differently during a Therapeutic Separation. Leaning on each other excessively can distort the impact of the separation and possibly sabotage the potential for clinical effectiveness.
3. Checkpoints need to be set such that feedback is shared between the two parties and the Therapist. These points should be set at designated intervals, such as once a month or every three months.
4. Potential dating of others needs to be discussed and is highly discouraged. If dating is considered by either party, legal advice is necessary, and the couple agrees they will inform each other in therapy if this occurs.

How can a Therapeutic Separation be used to benefit the marriage and the individuals (as opposed to a separation outside of the Therapeutic Process)?

1. It can allow time for the process of therapy to impact the relationship and perhaps cause a shift in the old dysfunctional patterns of behavior. This can benefit the relationship, whether or not reconciliation occurs in the future.
2. Therapy assists in learning new and healthier ways of experiencing and expressing feelings, thoughts, and fears, as well as developing healthier coping, communication, and conflict-resolution skills.
3. People who are going through a separation need a safe, neutral place to gain support and encouragement to move beyond the past. Relatives and friends may mean well, but often are not equipped to provide this kind of environment, and can sometimes inadvertently foster ineffective or unhealthy coping mechanisms.