The Sociopath In Couples Therapy

I do much couples therapy, and occasionally have had the interesting, if disconcerting, experience where one of the partners is a sociopath, or has significant sociopathic tendencies.

Unsurprisingly, it is always the nonsociopathic partner who is occasionally successful in dragging his or her sociopathic counterpart to counseling. The sociopathic partner, just as predictably, will have no collaborative interest in the relationship’s improvement. However, he or she may be sufficiently selfishly and manipulatively motivated to attend.

For instance, the relationship may offer conveniences the sociopathic partner does not want to see end. The nonsociopathic partner may have reached wit’s end and may really be prepared to end the relationship, arousing the sociopathic partner’s concerns that the gravy-train, as it were, may be over.

This can be the sociopath’s inducement to try to “patch things up with,” to “settle down” the nonsociopathic partner, in order to salvage the perks of the relationship. (The italicized phrases are meant to capture the sociopath’s condescending, self-serving thinking.)

The couples therapy environment provides little cover for the sociopath who, for this reason, will prefer generally to avoid it. The reason that sociopaths fare so poorly in disguising their sociopathy in a couples therapy situation is that, facing an aggrieved partner, the sociopath will struggle, and often fail, to produce responses of convincing sincerity and depth.

In other words, the sociopath’s fundamental defects of empathy and sincerity, in the emotional hotseat of couples counseling, are at risk of being flagrantly unmasked—sooner, typically, than in individual (court-mandated) counseling, where the sociopath, safe from the spontaneous challenges and disclosures of his abused partner, can more effectively misrepresent and deceive.

Couples counseling is contraindicated when a partner is a suspected sociopath for several reasons. Among them:

1) The therapist does not want to enable the belief (especially the nonsociopathic partner’s belief) that a nonabusive, honest relationship can possibly evolve with a sociopathic partner.

2) It is inherently humiliating for the nonsociopathic partner to make him(her)self vulnerable to a partner whose only capable response to that vulnerability is exploitative. The therapist does not want to collude in this process.
3) There is the risk that the sociopathic partner, who is probably blaming and possibly vengeful, will use her partner’s complaints during the session as a basis, after the session, to punish him for having had the audacity to expose her.

This risk, incidentally, applies to any abusive individual in couples therapy. The narcissist’s abusiveness in this situation will arise most likely from his sense of entitlement—for instance that his partner owes it to him to always make him look, and feel, good (in private and public).

For the sociopath, exposure may be experienced as a sort of defeat: mask is uncovered; his leverage as an operator—and with it his parasitical lifestyle—is threatened. Game may be over. He may be mad.

One accidental benefit of stumbling upon a sociopath in couples therapy is the chance it affords the therapist (who recognizes it) to be a professional (and desperately needed) witness for the nonsociopathic partner.

The therapist may be in a position to provide the vulnerable partner, in subsequent individual sessions after the couples counseling has been appropriately terminated, critical validation, information, and lifesaving support.

All of this presupposes the therapist’s ability to identify the sociopathic partner. When the couples therapist fails to identify that he or she is dealing with a couple in which one of the partners is sociopathic, the ensuing counseling process will undermine all of the nonsociopathic partner’s interests.

In failing to expose the sociopath, the counseling, by definition, will be abetting the sociopath. It will be structured on the false pretense that two reasonable clients are having problems with each other that they’ve co-created, which will not be the case. This false assumption will support the unequal, exploitative playing-field the sociopath has sewn all along.

For this reason—especially if your self-esteem has been battered in a relationship—I encourage you to explore assertively with a prospective therapist the extent of his or her experience with narcissistic and sociopathic personalities. Your inquiry should be met with absolute respect. A defensive response should rule the therapist out. And so should vague, general responses, along the lines of, “Well, yes, I’ve worked with these kinds of clients. Is that what you’re asking?”

The answer is “no.” That’s not what you are asking. You are asking for a more substantive response, characterized by the therapist’s interest and patience to discuss in some depth his or her clinical background with the personality-disordered population.