

Couples Therapy: A Way to Rebuild a Struggling Relationship



By Jefferson Singer and Karen Skerrett

Jeanne looked at Barry at the other side of the couch in our office. She asked him if he remembered when they were first married and lived in a horrible one-bedroom apartment that barely had heat. Did he remember how each morning he would make her the worst coffee in the world, using a leaky filter and a banged up metal pot- how he would carry it to the bedroom while she was still just waking up? Barry nodded that he remembered. Jeanne continued to search his face, "Why is it that that coffee tasted so good to me and now we have the most expensive coffee-making contraption that money can buy, and I

have to have my coffee just right, and I don't even want you to touch the pot?"

At the heart of this exchange, Jeanne has told a "we-story"- a shared story between members of a couple that defines and guides their relationship. Jeanne told this story to remind Barry of what they have lost and need to find once more if their relationship is to improve. In our new book, *Positive Couple Therapy: Using We-stories to Enhance Resilience* (Routledge), we provide a systematic approach for helping couples recover their unique we-stories in order to strengthen and/or rebuild struggling relationships.

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Couples therapy has long focused on the problems or what is wrong with too little attention paid to identifying and cultivating strengths, or what is right in the relationship. As couple therapists with nearly 70 years of combined experience, we have learned the critical importance of redirecting couples' attention to the affirming qualities of their relationship such as security, empathy, respect, acceptance, pleasure, humor, and shared meaning. We call these the 7 elements of We-ness (SERAPHS) and they are indeed the better angels of our relationships. Couples that feel this shared investment in each other possess the building blocks for healthy and resilient relationships, and this ingredient can be developed by finding and focusing on 'we-stories'.

Once couples can identify a "we-story", either recent or remote, they have a foundation that highlights what the relationship has to offer rather than what it lacks. Such a simple story can then become a metaphor, an image of what works between them and can be referred to during times of stress or challenge.

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Positive couple therapy: Using we-stories to enhance resilience provides simple and practical tools for reclaiming positive stories of connection- stories that provide a sense of hope to relationships that have become distressed. Examples of we-stories can be found on our website: we-stories.com or through [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com).

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