

Experiments in Love: *Innovative Approaches to Couples Therapy*



Exercise



'Working with Experiments'

*What does this
mean to you ?*



Experiment

- ◆ Experiments can emerge from **gestures, posture, pace, voice, beliefs, defenses, feelings, images, or bodily tensions**— anything you observe or track.
- ◆ Any tool, idea, resource or action can be used as an experiment as long as it is **nonviolent, grounded in present experience, and able to be unpacked with the client.**
- ◆ The possibilities are limited only by **creativity and imagination** (within appropriate guidelines).

Experiment

Contraindication For Use of Experiments:

- ◆ **Severe Emotional Instability** – Fragile ego, dissociation, psychosis.
- ◆ **Acute Distress or Crisis** – Grief, trauma flashbacks, overwhelming anxiety.
- ◆ **Limited Self-Awareness or Reflective Capacity** – Cannot observe or describe experience.
- ◆ **Severe Trauma Without Grounding** – Lack of coping skills may trigger re-traumatisation.
- ◆ **Neurocognitive Conditions** – Impaired reality testing or regulation.

Experiment



Technique -v- Experiment

- ◆ Recognising the difference between a Technique and an Experiment, and applying the right approach for the clients experience.

Do you know the difference?

A technique or...?



Technique:

- ◆ A technique is an exercise prepared in advance by the therapist to induce a particular state, or to direct the client toward a particular objective. E.G relaxation exercise

Experimental:

- ◆ An experiment is born out of the process of the therapeutic relationship, essentially aiming at process goals that cannot be planned (Joyce & Sills, 2006).

*"Do this, to see what you experience"; not, "Do this, in order to change"
(Greenberg, 1997).*

Exercise



What are the Aims
of Working with
Experiments?



Aims of Experiment



Aims of an Experiment

The aim of an experiment is to create a therapeutic environment where your client can:

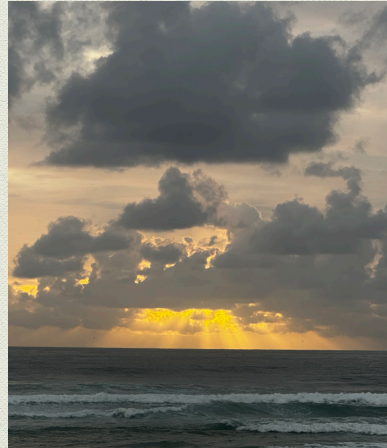
- ◆ Heighten Awareness
- ◆ Restore Healthy Self Regulation
- ◆ Explore and Develop New Behaviours
- ◆ Integrate Insight and Make Meaning

Any others you can think of...

Exercise



Is there a Difference Between Experiments with Individuals and Couples?



Exercise



Break Out Groups:

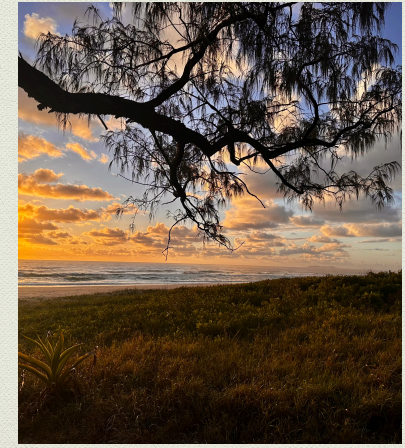
Different types of Experiment?

What do you know?

What have you tried?

What have you considered?

What holds you back?



Experiment

Experiments should expand awareness, not overwhelm capacity. The therapist's sensitivity to timing, readiness, and support is the foundation of ethical, experiential, couples work

Some important guidelines...

Guidelines



Guideline One: Born Out of the Therapeutic Relationship:

- ◆ **Presence and Authenticity:** Fully and genuinely in the moment
- ◆ **I-Thou Relationship:** Equal and respectful connection beyond roles or techniques.
- ◆ **Here-and-Now Awareness:** A focus on immediacy
- ◆ **Dialogue and Contact:** Changed through the interaction.

Guidelines



Guideline Two: Co-creation & Collaboration

- ◆ Experiment emerges *with* the client, not *for* the client.
- ◆ Built from curiosity, dialogue, and shared intention.
- ◆ Ensures safety, ownership, and engagement.
- ◆ Grade the experiment together

Co-Created helps equalise the power imbalance between therapist and client.

Guidelines



Guideline Three: Awareness Over Outcome

- ◆ Purpose is exploration, not performance.
- ◆ Success = increased awareness, not resolution.
- ◆ Stay open to the unknown.
- ◆ Move with the emerging figures from the experiment

Curiosity and discovery are the true measures of effectiveness.

Guidelines



Guideline Four: Safety & Support

- ◆ Match the level of challenge with adequate self/relationship/therapist support.
- ◆ The 'Safe Emergency' (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman)
- ◆ Pace the process to avoid overwhelm.
- ◆ Therapist remains grounded, attuned, and responsive.

Safety allows risk. Presence and containment create the conditions for experimentation and growth.

Guidelines



Guideline Five: Integration and Reflection

- ◆ Debrief the experience: *What did you notice? What does this mean for you?*
- ◆ Link new awareness to the individual's or couple's ongoing process.
- ◆ Explore emotional, cognitive, and embodied shifts that occurred.
- ◆ Consolidate learning before moving on.

Integration transforms insight into lasting change

Exercise



Experiments that stall,
stop or never start...

Lets Discuss



Experiment

Experiments that stall, stop or never start...

- ◆ Are likely to not fall within the guidelines appropriately
- ◆ Safety not established, rushed process, lack of engagement, resistance or avoidance, etc
- ◆ Although, even a stalled, stopped or never started experiment is valuable to the therapeutic process

Remember: *It is always appropriate to **abandon or pause experiments** that aren't working. Prioritising safety, readiness, and engagement is key.*

Exercise



Let's Try a Task!

- *Read Case Study Session Three together in your break out groups*

What experiments might you consider with this couples presentation?



Experiment

The Experiment in Process (Couples Therapy)

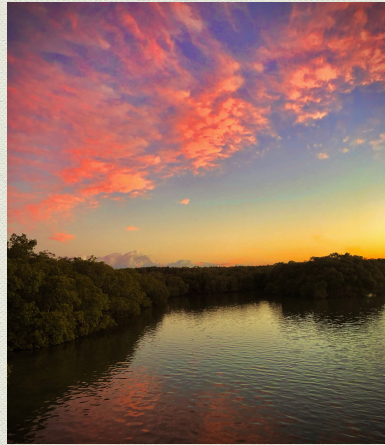
- ◆ **Track and Check In:** Observe both partners and gather verbal feedback on what is happening between them.
- ◆ **Stay in Contact:** Maintain awareness of each partner's ongoing experience to deepen relational exploration.
- ◆ **Adapt as Needed:** Use input from one or both partners to refine or adjust the experiment. Unexpected reactions become material for further insight.
- ◆ **Immerse and Explore:** Encourage both partners to engage fully in the felt sense of their experience and examine relational patterns as they unfold.

Exercise



Imagery & Metaphors

Lets Discuss



Imagery & Metaphors



- ◆ Provide clients with **alternative ways to express thoughts, feelings, and experiences.**
- ◆ Convey **complex or subtle meanings** that are hard to articulate directly.
- ◆ Stimulate **creativity, reflection, and active engagement** in therapy.
- ◆ Serve as **bridges between conscious and unconscious processes**, enhancing insight.
- ◆ Imagery and metaphor are **often the ground for experiments.**

Imagery

- ◆ Imagery is **thinking through the senses**: seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling.
- ◆ Includes **memories, dreams, daydreams, fantasies, and future visions.**
- ◆ Strongly affects **emotions** (e.g., imagining a loved one) and **physiology** (e.g., imagining a sour lemon).
- ◆ Enhances **experiential learning** by making abstract or unconscious material tangible.

Connection to Experiments:

*Therapists can use **imagery-based experiments** to evoke, track, and explore sensory and emotional experiences*

Metaphor

- ◆ Common in clients' language: "Feeling trapped," "burning with rage," "unequipped."
- ◆ Metaphors **symbolically represent inner states**, revealing underlying emotions and patterns.
- ◆ When combined with imagery, metaphors **evoke embodied experience**, enriching insight.

Connection to Experiments:

*Metaphors can **guide the design of experiential exercises**, offering symbolic material that clients can act out, explore, or embody in experiments.*

*Using metaphoric images in experiments **enhances creativity, emotional access, and awareness.***

Most Importantly



Look out for...

Vicarious Trauma
Compassion Fatigue
Burn out

be good to yourself

