

Paul, 43, is a teacher and employed by the same secondary school in Sheffield that he went to as a child. He's a devoted teacher and student mentor and unable to spend as much time with his family as he would like. His wife, Sandy, 37, looks after the couples' two young sons. Sandy left school with few qualifications and has always admired Paul's steady professionalism. The couple had a good quality of life, thanks to Paul's salary. A year ago, Paul was unexpectedly made redundant and this was followed by the death of Sandy's dad, 3 months later. The couple relationship suffered from these two life-changing events and Sandy in particular seemed unable to cope, retreating into depression. After 6 months, Sandy sought help when the teacher of their eldest son got in contact to say she was worried about his behaviour in class. Fortunately, Sandy's GP referred her to a local IAPT service where she was diagnosed with depression. The PWP that assessed her identified a relational aspect to the depression and the couple have been receiving Couple Therapy for Depression.



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The initial assessment

Paul and Sandy were initially seen together by their couple therapist. She asked them why they had come and what they wanted to change in their relationship. She explored, in depth, the depression. She did this for both halves of the couple; what was it like to experience and what was it like to witness; how bad did it get; what were the symptoms; what treatment plan was Sandy on and have they noticed any change because of it? This attention to detail is vital because of the risk associated with depression and in order to assess whether couple work is suitable. Their therapist saw them individually for sessions two and three, to screen for any domestic violence and abuse, as well as to get a clear picture of the extent of the depression.

Sandy said that Paul had stopped talking to her completely, while she accused him of taking over her job as a mum, leaving her nothing to do. Paul, in turn, said he had lost respect for Sandy who seemed to lie around on the sofa all day and feel sorry for herself; that she had no idea what he was going through. He'd tried to support her around the death of her dad but her hopelessness was too much for him; he needed to stay positive to find another job and support the family. As money got tighter, their feelings of blame towards the other increased.

Their therapist identified a mutual trap and pattern in their relating to one another that, although intended to protect each other, actually exacerbated their difficulties. It began with Paul not being able to talk about his grief over losing his job. This affected both of them; overwhelmed with real fears for their future and anger at 'the world' for making Paul redundant. Paul's loss of status and role was subsequently superseded by the death of Sandy's dad; which pitched the couple into a strange, rivalrous world of 'who had got it worse'. In feeling unheard and misunderstood, the lack of empathy they felt from the other led to increased isolation and despair.

As well as psycho-education around the symptoms of depression, their therapist identified a malign interpersonal cycle between them: the more Sandy appealed to Paul and described her grief, the more he withdrew and refused to engage. They stopped having a sexual relationship and all affection between them ceased. In this fourth formulation session, their therapist described their distance/closeness dilemma and the stuck, polarised stance that was so distressing. The couple were able to hear this and feel understood for the first time in long while. The therapist also identified the strengths in their relationship and their commitment to getting it back on track, which instilled a sense of hope that had been absent.

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Six weeks into therapy

By session six, Sandy and Paul's therapeutic alliance with their therapist appeared to be growing and they were able to experiment with some of the communication exercises she asked them to try out in the session and then replicate at home between sessions. The Communication Wheel exercise, where they took it in turns to talk openly in an attempt to broaden their understanding of each other's perspectives, was revelatory. Sandy heard, for the first

time, how Paul's trust in the world had been shaken by being made redundant, along with his sense of masculinity, (reflected in his lack of libido). Paul, in turn, could hear how the normally resourceful Sandy had felt suffused with her own uselessness to help both with his joblessness and then, later, when he took over her parenting of their children. These had combined to leave her self-esteem at an all-time-low.

Echoes from the past

Mid-way through the treatment, the therapist was surprised that Paul's Patient Health Questionnaire, (PHQ9)11 score, which had consistently been at 0 for the first five sessions, but was creeping up. By session ten, Paul was scoring 12, indicating he was in the range of moderate depression. Sandy's score on the PHQ9 had fallen from 15 (moderately severe depression) to 12 (moderate depression) which had indicated to the therapist that the treatment was helpful to the couple. Paul's rising 'score' seemed to communicate something else. Alarmed, the therapist took the case to her supervisor and together they thought about Paul's silence at the start of therapy and how he had begun to open up and talk about his feelings for the first time in a long while. They also linked this development to some genogram (family tree) exploration that the couple had worked on during session six. Paul had described his grandmother as being bed-ridden with depression for most of his childhood and said that his mum had constantly feared that the same would happen to her. This helped the therapist to understand why Sandy's depression was so frightening for Paul and why, as a result, he had defensively pushed his wife away.

Fostering communication

Session twelve saw the couple embark on some behavioural and problem-solving exercises. When these occasionally broke down with a return to anger and blame, the therapist would revert back to the communication exercises that helped Paul and Sandy to slow down their interaction enough to be able to understand the fears that were prompting the defensive pattern between them. In one particularly moving session, Paul was able to say how much he missed 'the old Sandy' and how he worried that she would never be happy again. Sandy said she had no idea he felt like that. The couple were united as they both realised that they shared the anxiety that things could not go back to what they had been. This enabled them to mourn what had been lost together and conveyed a new reality to the depressed feelings. They could now see that their 'couple system' had been overloaded with stress and grief. In sharing this loss, the couple were then able to think about how they could move forward, and gradually the energy to create a new togetherness began to gather momentum.

Building a foundation for long-lasting change

In sessions fifteen and sixteen the therapist worked with Paul and Sandy to formulate a relapse prevention plan and focus on what it was that had particularly helped them during the treatment and the time at home between sessions. This essential task allowed the couple to feel confident that they had assimilated a new toolkit to handle any return of depression differently in the future. They also thought together about the support system around them as a couple and decided that they would approach Sandy's mum to see if she would help out with the boys more in order to free Sandy up to try and find some work.

Results for relationship satisfaction

In reviewing their IAPT minimum data set over the course of treatment (which their therapist had helpfully transposed into a graph) along with the couple measure that they completed at the start and end of therapy, the couple could see how both their levels of depression could come down, as well as go up during times of stress. They were both very pleased that their partner's satisfaction in the relationship was higher at the end of treatment than at the start, as was their therapist.

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Postscript: It took another year for Paul to find teaching work but, in the meantime, he volunteered as coach to his sons' school football team and was pleased to be able to spend more time with them. Sandy went to college part-time to train as a hairdresser, able to leave the boys as Paul and her mum could step in and offer child-care. Sandy relished the opportunity to learn something new and to contribute to the family's well-being financially. This balance was reflected in a newfound resilience and intimacy in their couple relationship.

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