

# Discerning the Big “D”:

Utilizing Discernment Counseling  
Techniques in Couples Therapy

Presented By:

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# Group Discussion Questions:

- What type of clients do you primarily work with? Individuals? Couples? Adolescents?
- What percentage of your sessions are couples/family sessions?
- What are some of the difficulties of working with couples?
- What needs to be present or understood by the couple in order for Couples Therapy to be effective?
- What do you feel is one of the greatest predictors that therapy will be successful or unsuccessful?

# Origins of Discernment Counseling

- Developed by Bill Doherty through his work on the “Couples on the Brink” Project at the University of Minnesota
- Dr. Doherty noticed that there is no effective protocol for **“Mixed-Agenda”** couples, where one partner is leaning toward divorce, while the other wants to work on the relationship.
- Bill went on to found the Doherty Relationship Institute, which developed, studied and utilized Discernment Counseling to help couples on the verge of Divorce.
- DC helps address **“Divorce Ambivalence”**- So many couples enter into the divorce process not knowing if divorce is really what they want. They don't know how to slow down the “freight train” of divorce, or if reconciliation is possible.

# What kinds of Couples can Benefit from DC?

- Couples who have at least one partner considering **divorce**,
- When Couples Therapy seems to be ineffective or “spinning their wheels”,
- When the **“Leaning-In / Leaning-Out” cycle** is present. Often when one partner is unmotivated or uninterested in being an active participant in Couples Therapy.
- Sometimes Couples Therapy needs a “jump-start”.



# Goals of Discernment Counseling:

- Help clients gain confidence and clarity about the decision-making process regarding the future of the relationship.
- Help clients gain a deeper understanding of what happened in their relationship.
- Help each partner “own” their contributions to the problems in their relationship.
- NOT to offer any direct interventions into the relationship, or try to fix any of the presented problems.
- Offer hope to the Leaning In partner, and relief for the Leaning Out partner.

# Discernment Counseling is different than Couples Therapy:

## Discernment Counseling:

- Is a decision-making process about the future of the relationship
- Divorce is “on the table”
- Recognizes the Leaning-In/Leaning-Out cycle and the imbalance that it produces
- Is limited in number of sessions (closed-ended)
- Does not offer direct interventions to help with couple's problems

## Couples Therapy:

- Couple has already decided the path forward
- Divorce is “off the table”
- Neither partner is actively leaning-out, and motivations for change are relatively equal
- No limit to potential number of sessions (open-ended)
- Is a process of utilizing targeted interventions to assist a couple in “fixing” their problems.

# What Discernment Counseling Looks Like:

- Maximum of 5 sessions, with no personal commitment beyond the next session,
- Both partners come to the sessions, but focus is on individual work with each partner
- Structure of each session
  - 1. Couple Check-in (5-10 minutes)
  - 2. Meet individually with first partner (35-40 minutes)
  - 3. Switch and meet individually with other partner (35-40 minutes)
  - 4. Reconnect together at end (5-10 minutes)

# What do you work on in DC?

- Deciding between 1 of 3 paths forward:
  - **Path 1:** Going back to the way things have been (status quo),
  - **Path 2:** Pursuing Divorce or otherwise ending the relationship,
  - **Path 3:** Pursuing Couples Therapy for a period of 6 months with divorce “off the table”
- Helping each partner recognize and “own” each of their individual contributions to the problems in their relationship.
- Helping each partner have a deeper understanding of the problems that have led them to the point of looking at divorce.



- Address the “Leaning-In/Leaning-Out” dynamic present in the relationship, and help each partner begin to become more neutral (good boundaries).To take the pressure off the Leaning Out partner, and give Leaning In partner more peace and confidence.
- Helping each individual understand and be able to commit to the requirements of Couples Therapy, if that's the path they choose.
- Assist the couple in peacefully transitioning into the Divorce process, if that's the path they choose. Refer to appropriate professionals, and work with the “Leaning-In” partner in acceptance of the other partner's wishes.
- What we do NOT work on: attempting to fix any of the problems or conflict issues brought up during DC. These issues are addressed when both partners agree to pursue Path 3, and each sign the “Agreement to Pursue Reconciliation”.

# The Role of the “Leaning-In/ Leaning-Out” Cycle

- A very powerful, structural element of a relationship on the verge of divorce.
- It's an often invisible “fuel line” to a couple's conflict problems.
- It doesn't matter what the couple's specific “issues” are, or what their conflict is centered around, if this cycle is active.
- Must be dealt with before effective Couples Therapy can be attempted.
- Even in Couples Therapy (Not DC), the therapist needs to be able to address this structural problem before attempting to flesh out the other conflict issues.

# How to Spot the LI/LO Cycle in a Couple



- Group Discussion: Leaning-In/Leaning-Out Scenarios



# Scenario #1

A husband and wife come in for Couples Therapy. They have been married for 15 years, with 3 children in elementary school. The wife is a stay-at-home mom, while the husband works a full-time job at a popular restaurant and bar. During the initial session, as the couple is describing their conflict, the wife complains that “he works so much and when he gets home, he just wants to flop down on the couch and watch TV. I try to get him to engage with the kids, and he refuses. I try to get him to talk to me but he keeps finding other things to do”. The wife also reports that her husband, rather than coming straight home after work, often stays at his job, having drinks with coworkers. He does this sometimes until late at night, and then comes home and goes right to bed. During the initial session, the husband sits quietly and listens to his wife's complaints, and says “I like my job, and I like to hang out with my coworkers after work. Is that so bad? I never come home drunk. I only have one or two beers. When I do get home, all I get from her is nagging and complaining about what I'm not doing at home and with the family. She's on me all the time, and it makes it so I don't really want to come home. She's driving me crazy. And now all she wants to do is drag me in here just to talk even more about it!” At the end of the session, the husband states that he is very dissatisfied with the state of their relationship, and frustrated with the way things are, “and I don't know if I really want to work on this. I think I might want out...”



# Scenario #2

A male comes in for an initial counseling session alone, stating that he is married, with no children. As the therapy session begins, he quickly reports that he suspects his wife of having an extramarital affair with her High School sweetheart, whom she has apparently reconnected with over social media. The husband says “I've suspected it for a few months now, and so I've secretly installed an app on her phone so I can track her throughout the day. I also know her Facebook password, so I have been checking up on her activity. I've seen her having some very inappropriate conversations with this guy”. As the conversation progresses, you find out from the husband, that his wife has discovered his surveillance efforts and has begun deleting conversations with her affair partner. The husband continues, “since she found out that I know what she's up to, she's become even more secretive, and is really angry at me. So the other night I decided to call her mom and tell her about what is going on, and asked her to try to talk to my wife and get her to end this relationship and recommit to our marriage”. And after talking about how that, too has failed to get his wife to recommit, “then I decided to come in and try to get counseling to see if you could help me get her to come around”.

# Scenario #3

A married couple comes in for counseling, married for 22 years, and with 2 teenage kids. As the couple begin describing their problems, the wife says “ever since the kids have been in school, and I've been able to go back to work full time, my husband wants to spend all his time either hunting or fishing with his buddies. He'll be out at our farm just outside of town, hunting for deer, ducks or pigs or whatever he can shoot”. The wife went on to report that “no matter what I say to him or how many times I complain to him about this, he just comes back with 'I love hunting and it's very important for me', and 'I need it to help unwind from my stressful job'. He just doesn't hear my side of things.” The husband, who initiated counseling then gave his perspective on the problems, saying “that's not really why we're here though. Everything she has said is true, but the reason we're here is because she took the kids a few days ago, and just moved out, saying she wants a divorce. I didn't think it was that big of deal, but then she up and does that, and now I don't know what to do”. Husband goes on and expresses how he is ready to start discussing their problems, and resolving some of their conflict, but is concerned that his wife has “checked out”, and has filed for divorce. The husband expressed that he doesn't want to get a divorce, and is now very motivated to engage in counseling to try to work on their conflict. The wife, however has expressed that “he's like that. He'll do whatever he wants, and then as soon as I put my foot down like this, he'll suddenly get super motivated and loving. And then, when the heat dies down, he'll just go

# Scenario #4

A couple comes in for Couples Therapy, complaining of a general sense of coldness in their relationship. They have been married for 3 years and, near the beginning of their initial session, the wife expresses that “we haven't ever struggled with horrible conflict or anything major. But I just find myself not liking him anymore. I mean I love him, but I'm just not *in love* with him anymore. We got married very young, and I think we just got married for the wrong reasons. We've both grown and matured, and I just don't think we're compatible anymore”. After listening to her account of their problems, you ask the husband's perspective on it, and he says, “I always believed that you're not supposed to expect those 'fluttering butterflies' feelings in a mature relationship. I've learned that you have to cultivate deeper things than that. Love is more than just feelings. It's about commitment, and mutual respect, and even discipline. It's something that needs to be nurtured, and you can't just toss it when you don't feel like doing the work. I think she has unrealistic expectations of what this is supposed to look like”.



# Scenario #5

A mother and father client come in for counseling, asking for help in dealing with their 16 year old son. They complain that their son has begun to spend more time with friends, and less time with family. The mother expresses during the session, that “he used to love to hang out with us at home, and do the things we do. But now, he hardly says one word to us. He just gets home from school and heads to his room to do his homework”. The clients report that their son is still doing well in school, and to their knowledge he is not engaged in any dangerous or illegal activities with his friends. He has no major behavioral problems. But the father says that “yeah he just doesn't want to hang out with me anymore either. We used to go to games together, and go hunting together and stuff like that, but now he just has no interest in that stuff. I wonder if he's struggling with depression or something”. Both parents say that they try their best to engage their son in meaningful conversation, to try and “get him to open up to us”, but are met with single-word answers and a general guardedness and reluctance to talk. They also report that their son will sometimes get angry and defensive whenever the parents persistently attempt to connect with him through meaningful conversation. When you ask if their son would like to come in for a counseling session, they say that they have attempted on other occasions to get him in to a therapist, but “he has been really resistant, and says that he is fine and doesn't need a therapist”.



# Common Couples Therapist Mistakes

- Joining with the Leaning-In Partner in “pursuing the distancer”
- Continuing with “half-hearted” Couples Therapy
- Withholding meaningful help, unless they both want therapy

# How Does a Therapist Effectively Motivate an Unmotivated Partner?

- Connect with their pain and frustration (empathy),
- Meet one on one, rather than in the presence of their partner
- Limited time-frame of counseling
- Offer to work with the Leaning-In partner on easing their pressure on the Leaning-Out partner (slow down, or stop the LI/LO cycle)

# How can I use Discernment Counseling principles and techniques in my everyday practice?

- Recognize when a couple is on the brink of Divorce (assess the severity of the LI/LO cycle) and make an appropriate referral to a Discernment Counselor,
- Become certified as a Discernment Counselor,
- Utilize what Discernment Counseling teaches us about the nature of motivation (or lack thereof) in partners, and the “pursuit/retreat” cycle present in nearly every relationship. This will help couples be able to manage conflict more effectively, preventing them from becoming “on the brink”.

# Discussion Question:

In your opinion, what is the one thing that effectively causes the death of any committed relationship?





# Pursuit/Retreat in Everyday Conflict

- Each individual has their own “style” of handling conflict
- Some people naturally “pursue” in the course of conflict with their partner, while others naturally “retreat”
- **Discussion Question:** Where do you suppose a person gets their conflict “style”?
- **Discussion Question:** Therapists, which do you tend to do when you're involved in conflict? Pursue or Retreat? Can you think of an example?

# Handling Conflict

How well a couple handles conflicts that arise between them is a major indicator of the success or happiness that couple will experience through their time together.

**Discussion Question:** Is the presence of conflict a sign that they are a “bad couple”, whose relationship is in trouble?

**Discussion Question:** What does it mean for a couple to resolve a conflict? What is “resolution”?

# Reframing Conflict

- Conflict can either destroy or enhance a relationship, depending on how it's handled.
- “If there is one lesson I have learned from my years of research it is that a lasting marriage results from a couple's ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship. Many couples tend to equate a low level of conflict with happiness and believe the claim “we never fight” is a sign of marital health. But I believe we grow in our relationships by reconciling our differences. That's how we become more loving people and truly experience the fruits of marriage” -John Gottman
- “Your marriage needs conflict.” -Greg Smalley

# Good and Bad Conflict

## Good Conflict

- Is productive
- Allows each person to utilize each of their own conflict styles in a “safe environment”.
- Challenges each partner to allow the other to have their own style.
- Results in a deeper understanding of each other, and therefore more appreciation, and eventually deeper love and intimacy.
- Good conflict accepts the presence of genuine emotional reactions, and has an accepted system of ground rules.

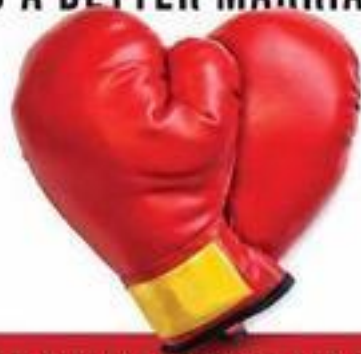
## Bad Conflict

- Is destructive
- Does not recognize differences in conflict styles and creates an “unsafe environment”.
- Attempts to force the other person to conform to your own conflict style.
- Results in “hardened hearts” toward each other. Each partner gives in to their own negative interpretations of each other.
- Doesn't have a good set of ground rules for handling emotion



**What books do you recommend to your clients on how to manage and resolve conflict?**

# FIGHT YOUR WAY TO A BETTER MARRIAGE



HOW HEALTHY CONFLICT CAN TAKE  
YOU TO DEEPER LEVELS OF INTIMACY

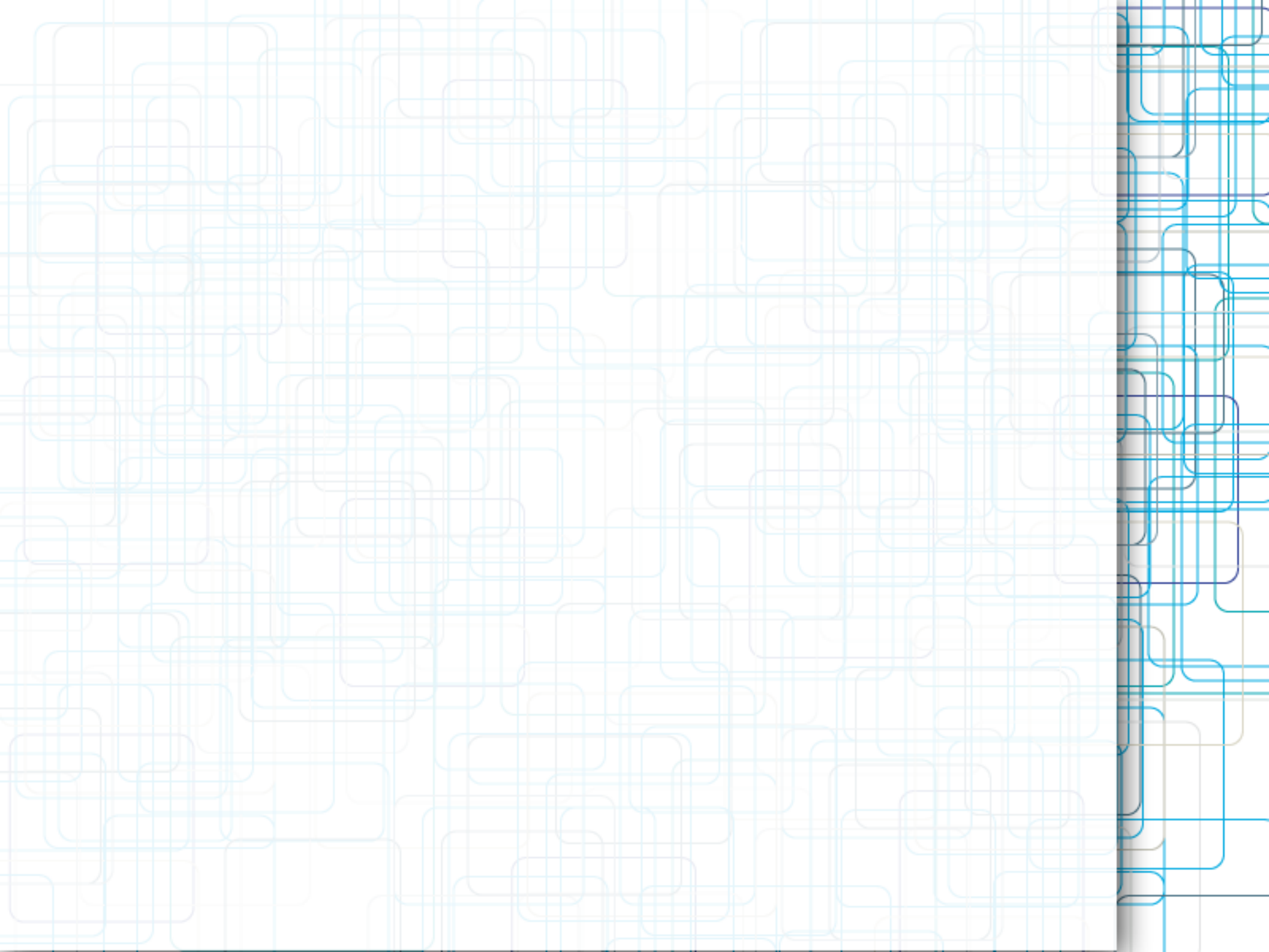


**DR. GREG SMALLEY**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF MARRIAGE AT FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

# Pursuit/Retreat as a Structural Dynamic

- Why do some partners tend to “pursue” conflict, while others tend to “retreat” from or avoid conflict?
- Some individuals are tend to be more insecure in their self-image, and rely on the relationship for their sense of self.
- Others can be said to be more secure in their identity and are not as dependent on the relationship for their sense of self.





# Ethics for LMFT & LPC

Presented By:

Matt Stevenson, LMFT

3 hrs of Ethics CEU's

11/30/2018

# Ethics Topic #1: Confidentiality in **Couples Counseling & Dicerment Counseling**

- Discussing the “Limits to Confidentiality” with clients
- What do the various codes of ethics say on the topic of confidentiality between partners or family members?
  - ACA (B.4.b.)
  - APA (10.02)
  - AMHCA (3.K-M)
  - AAMFT (2.1-2.2)
  - IAMFC (B)
  - Oklahoma Title 86 Licensure “Rules” (15-3-2-c)
  - “No Secrets Policy” in Informed Consent Packet
  - DC Expectations of Confidentiality

# Ethics Topic #2: Record-keeping with Couples/Family Therapy

- Paperwork for each individual, or shared paperwork for the couple/family unit?
- No clear ethical standards for this specific context; what do you do, and why?

# Ethics Topic #3: Distance Therapy (Teletherapy)

- Provide a specific “Informed Consent” in addition to the typical packet.
- All software and communication method must be encrypted for confidentiality
- Specifically make client aware of emergency procedures
- Distance Counseling across state lines?



## **Ethics Topic #4: Networking for appropriate and effective referrals**

- Know the limits of your own practice and competency, and be willing to make appropriate referrals.
- It's important to get to know other professionals, so that you can have a robust referral list.
- Fill out the questionnaire and spend some time networking with the other participants to add to your referral list.
- Facilitator will collect questionnaires to compile and email out to participants after the conference.

## Group Discussion: Ethics Vignettes

- We will spend the rest of our time working in groups, discussing the various scenarios that will be provided.