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# TRAIN TO BE A COUPLE THERAPIST



**JOHN FENNA  
LOOKS AT THIS  
SHORTAGE AREA**

**T**he story of couple therapy began in 1948 when the social upheaval of World War II had wreaked havoc on British relationships and left divorce rates six times higher than they had been pre-war. Born at the same time as the NHS, the Tavistock Institute of Medical Psychology (now known as Tavistock Relationships) was established to research and support mental health issues, including those associated with family and couple crisis.

Much of the work of the Tavistock was inspired by the 'Bott Hypothesis' developed by anthropologist and Kleinian psychoanalyst Elizabeth Bott. She was the first expert to examine the impact of a couple's relationship on mental health and wellbeing, and her work heavily influenced Tavistock Relationship's progressive approach.

70 years on, the charity is providing close to 20,000 clinical sessions for couples and individuals each year. Its services are affordable, based on the couple's income, with no minimum fee.

Thankfully the stigma attached to seeking couple therapy has long gone. But higher demand combined with a lack of trained therapists means that many people in the UK are not getting the support they need.

A study by Relate in 2015 'The Way We Are Now' found nearly one-in-five (18%) of the population (2.87 million) are in relationships that could be characterised as 'distressed'. Yet there is only one specialist therapist available (that is, trained couple counsellors or psychotherapists) for every 21,500 people living in the UK. Andrew Balfour, Chief Executive of Tavistock Relationships, says, "We have seen a 25 per cent higher demand for our services in the last three years, so we need more people to come and train with us to support more couples."

## **The work of a couple therapist**

I spoke to David Smith of Tavistock Relationships to discover what it takes to become a couple counsellor and a psychotherapist - helping couples with their relationship problems through a programme of therapy sessions tailor-made for each couple. David trained with Tavistock Relationships and has been working with them as a counsellor for over six years.

## **What attracted you to train as a couple psychotherapist?**

I had been working in accountancy for over 20 years, but wanted to do something that really made a difference to people's lives. I thought about how important my relationship was to my own life and decided to train as a psychotherapist, helping couples.

## **Why is couple therapy so important?**

Studies show that relationships matter - to the mental health of both parties and the welfare of any children. By extension that means if relationships can be supported and understood, society is better off, with better outcomes for everyone.

## **What sort of qualities do you think are required of a counsellor?**

A real interest in people and what makes them tick. A strong capacity for empathy and a curiosity about how to engage with people to help them with the difficulties they are facing. There is a real skill involved in being present without getting emotionally involved and to be open-minded and non-judgemental regarding people's lives.

Anyone seeking a therapist should ensure that their qualification has been accredited by a leading organisation such as the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), the British Psychoanalytic Council (BPC) or the College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists (COSRT).

## **What was the hardest part of the training?**

The counselling and personal development that you have to do as part of the training is probably the hardest part. It forces you to develop greater self-awareness, to challenge perceptions of yourself and your own relationships and to face up to your weaknesses. You have to be able to understand your own faults in order to be a good therapist.

## **What's the best thing about being a couple therapist?**

I'd say it is in helping people to rediscover their connection. Very often people turn up to therapy in despair and unable to talk to each other. It is really rewarding to work with a couple and see them communicate better by the end. Around 70 per cent of couples receiving treatment report an improvement in their relationship quality.

## **What are the most common areas of disagreement for couples today?**

Sex, money and employment come up a lot. Complaints about who does or doesn't do what, and complaints that a partner isn't available for some reason are common. Major life transitions also often cause conflict, such as the birth of a child, loss of a job, children leaving home or the death of a parent. Every couple comes with their own particular problem that they want help with. Psychotherapists are trained to help people to come to a deeper understanding of things that can affect relationships.



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### What would you say to people who are considering a career change to couple therapy?

Some life experience is essential for those who become counsellors. People come to counselling from many different backgrounds and it is often a second or third career choice. It is a rewarding career, dedicated to helping others in emotional difficulty, and it's also a relatively flexible way of working. But that doesn't mean it's easy. Commitment to training is required and qualification requires part-time study.

Therapists can earn up to £200 per session in London. The average is around £100 per session in London, and slightly lower in other parts of the country. There isn't a set period of time that couples come, but therapy is normally more effective over a period of months. Clients are recruited by word of mouth, via our website and referrals from other therapists working with individuals.

Over two-thirds of the 1,500 specially-trained couple therapists currently practising in the UK will have trained the Tavistock's two London clinics. Graduates also work for Relate, the NHS or set up their own practice. The current shortage of specially-trained couple therapists means employment prospects for certified professionals are very high.

### Training

Training programmes at Tavistock Relationships are in counselling, psychotherapy and psychosexual therapy, ranging from introductory and specialist programmes to Masters and doctorate level. Training

takes up to four years, depending on qualifications on entry and is part-time, so it can be done alongside other commitments. Applicants need a first degree or equivalent professional qualification and relevant work experience, or to have completed the Introductory Course in Couple Counselling & Psychotherapy. Students are offered clinical work within the organisation, so they don't have to find their own clients to build up their counselling hours. The cost of training starts at £1,200 for the Introductory course and it's currently £5,500 per annum for years 1-3 of the PgDip course. Some financial assistance packages are available to support study. ([www.tavistockrelationships.ac.uk](http://www.tavistockrelationships.ac.uk))

Formerly the Marriage Guidance Council, the charity **Relate** is the UK's largest provider of relationship support. Relate's counsellors and sex therapists help over one million people every year, and receive regular supervision and support throughout their training and practice. For entry to the Relate CPCAB Level 4 Introduction to Relationship Counselling, students need a Level 3 Certificate in Counselling and Listening Skills or counselling/listening skills training and experience working with an organisation such as the Samaritans or Childline. ([www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk))

### References

[www.relate.org.uk/sites/default/files/012016\\_relationships\\_stats\\_final\\_0.pdf](http://www.relate.org.uk/sites/default/files/012016_relationships_stats_final_0.pdf)  
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