

How to Fix Your Marriage in 16 Hours

'High impact' couples therapy is costly, intense—and, its fans say, more effective than traditional counseling

By John Koten

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Couples therapy—the venue for the messy job of tackling the disillusionment, betrayals, moribund sex lives and other issues that pop up between partners—has a new variant. Called “high-impact therapy,” it is rapidly gaining fans among those who’ve tried it.

Chris and Erin van der Velde took the plunge when they signed up for therapy with Ellyn Bader, a psychologist in Menlo Park, Calif. The van der Veldes, ages 60 and 59, respectively, run a sprawling golf resort together in Bend, Ore. Although the resort is successful, the pressures of managing 250 employees and a flood of customers had been taking a toll on both of them and their 34-year-old marriage.

“Our relationship suffered in part because there’s this constantly screaming baby we have to deal with,” says Chris van der Velde, referring to the resort. Says Erin van der Velde: “We were losing our sense of connection.” The two had already tried traditional couples therapy. But, Chris says, “There were a lot of sessions where I left wondering what I had just paid for.”

So this time, the van der Veldes turned to Bader, who has helped develop the high-impact approach, the centerpiece of which is the “couples intensive”—16 hours of highly structured work over a two-day period.



“It was like nothing we’ve ever done before,” says Erin. “You don’t have to be in a crisis to benefit from this.”

High-impact therapy (there’s also a shorter version called the four-hour mini intensive) is an increasingly popular strategy, as both psychologists and their clients have grown frustrated with the drawbacks of classic couples therapy, which they say suffers from a lack of continuity from one session to the next.

The regular approach

Conventional couples therapy typically involves weekly 50-minute sessions of the kind popularized by psychoanalyst Orna Guralnik in the Showtime documentary series “Couples Therapy.” On the program, couples from all backgrounds arrive in Guralnik’s New York office to try to hash out the things that have broken their relationship.

But critics of the traditional approach say that the relatively short (even if they sometimes seem endless) sessions make it hard to create momentum from session to session. New issues pop up, fresh disclosures get made, and much of what happened the week before is forgotten. A contentious point in the session can re-emerge on the drive home, sans the therapist. Or a nonsensical fight that happened the evening before therapy may completely take over the session.

“Traditional couples therapy has a place, but it also can be deeply frustrating for all three participants,” says Bader. Fifty minutes isn’t much time to delve deeply, she says. If the therapist talks for 10 of those minutes, there is only 20 minutes left for each partner.

Guralnik, however, is not so sure. “I believe in slow,” she says. “I do understand why it would be appealing to think you could fix your marriage in a weekend, but real change takes a long time.” She believes the primary advantage of an intensive is that it can bring about deep revelations that can be further explored and worked on.

It is worth noting that couples therapy itself is a fairly recent phenomenon. Before the 1980s, marriage counseling was primarily the province of clergy and other counselors, and psychologists scoffed at the idea that they would do this work. Many, if not most, believed a true therapeutic relationship couldn’t happen with three people in the room, and that any change in the couple would be superficial at best. Yet the rise of new disciplines like family therapy,

cognitive therapy and gestalt helped psychologists see that there might be room to try new things.



Psychologist Ellyn Bader PHOTO: SCOTT R. KLINE

One of the more influential therapists spearheading this transition was Bader. She and her husband, Peter Pearson, founded the Couples Institute in Menlo Park in 1984, which encouraged therapists to treat relationships as well as individuals.

Bader, now the institute's CEO, created something called "the developmental model" for couples. Introduced in 1988, it is a method that its advocates say has helped tens of thousands of partnerships in 70 countries.

The model charts the trajectory of successful relationships from the fantasies and infatuations of first love through four more stages that end with a full partnership and full acceptance of the notion that two people can work together more successfully and happily than one. At its most basic, Bader's developmental model describes a path that couples travel on as they encounter the tensions that can arise from a continuing conflict between the desire for autonomy and the desire for connection.

One of Bader's students was Lori Weisman, a psychotherapist in Bellevue, Wash. Six years ago, Weisman adapted Bader's model to a 16-hour intensive program. Since then, more than 100 therapists from around the country have been schooled in this technique from Bader, Weisman and other trainers. The Couples Institute just completed its first round of training for people who will teach other therapists the technique. Bader herself has guided 60 couples through intensive sessions and Weisman about 100.

'Intensive' preparation

A big difference between an intensive and regular couples therapy is the early preparation that happens before the therapist even meets with the partners. Both candidates fill out five lengthy intake questionnaires about themselves and their relationship. (*How do you resolve conflicts? What do you do when you get angry?*)

Couples are screened for untreated mental illness, ongoing affairs, domestic violence and substance abuse. Those are usually disqualifiers and the couples will be referred elsewhere. The therapist may then spend several days crafting the intensive to take the couple's specifics into account.

Sessions typically start at 9 a.m. in either an office or a hotel. There are several short breaks during the day and lunch is an hour (the therapist doesn't eat with the couple). The day ends around 5 p.m.

The first day focuses on reviewing the intake answers together to target areas for growth in the relationship. In addition, couples also begin learning communications skills, including the importance of knowing how to actively listen rather than to react defensively out of insecurity.

There's also a short introduction to neuroplasticity—the brain's ability to repair and change by creating new neural pathways. This is central to developing new habits related to listening and responding (for instance, don't argue with your partner until you have asked them enough questions about why they just said what they said). Couples must practice this stuff and the therapist will give them homework to do so. (Couples often check back in with the therapist down the road for help staying on their new path.)

In Bader's five-stage model of a couple's development, stage two is where nearly everyone hits a rocky patch. They have departed the romantic fantasy world of stage one—"We like the same songs!"—and have started to become aware of disillusioning facts: interests that conflict, communications styles that don't always mesh well, values that depart on important matters.

This transition can be dangerous if disappointments lead to distancing, avoidance, or out-and-out combat. In stage two, individuals also find it difficult to separate what belongs to them and what doesn't—such as when one person blames the other without recognizing that they also played a role.

Most couples, Bader says, muddle along in stage two for as long as their marriage lasts, unable to see either themselves or the relationship clearly. Some, drawn by the euphoria of stage one, decide to regress and have an affair. Others, miserable in their plight, tear down their partners. Bader calls this stage "differentiation" because it is when couples do the hard work of candidly enumerating their differences so that they can work through them.

The second day of intensive therapy is largely devoted to "co-creating a new relationship," says Bader. "From the very beginning, I tell people that the key question isn't what you want to change in your partner, but what you are willing to change in yourself to have the kind of relationship you want."



The van der Veldes say they were stunned at how much the intensive improved their marriage and their lives.. PHOTO: WILL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Chris van der Velde found day two the most difficult. “I learned that trust issues I had with my father were continuing to affect how I behaved in important relationships,” he says. “It isn’t even something I had thought about and yet here was this a powerful revelation.”

Some of the work during the final eight hours involves setting boundaries and priorities for the couple based on the goal they have created for their marriage. Communication tools are introduced and repeatedly practiced using various exercises under the therapist’s supervision. The therapist will encourage the couple to adopt a curious mindset toward themselves and each other. The goal now is to learn to respond to each other rather than merely react.

‘Epic progress’

Because it is new, no studies have yet been done to verify the value of intensive therapy. But anecdotally, many patients and therapists are enthusiastic. “People can make epic progress in this format,” says Katherine Waddell, a therapist who supervises intensives in Northampton, Mass. “During an intensive, couples can really slow down, turn their phones to silent, breathe, focus on one another and themselves. This prepares them to work on the issues that are at the very core of their relationship.”

Still, intensive therapy isn’t for everybody. For one thing, concentrating therapy into two eight-hour days can be too intense for some couples. Overwhelmed patients have sometimes stormed out of sessions or completely shut down.

The cost also will give some pause. Fees range from \$7,000 to \$15,000 depending on the therapist.

Still, many who have tried it find it liberating to have so much time to reveal what they truly think.

Andrea Tang, a therapist in Port St. Lucie, Fla., says the first intensive she conducted was with a couple in their 30s who were so cut off from each other that they'd head for opposite sides of a room. "They left holding hands," says Tang. Transformations like these, she adds, "leave me speechless."

More recently, however, another of Tang's couples was so emotionally barricaded that the therapist eventually decided to cut the session short and send the 40-something pair on their way with a refund. "You can't make any progress when no one is willing to be vulnerable," says Tang.

A final advantage of intensive therapy: It can be easier for busy people to find a weekend to do it, as opposed to trying to squeeze their lives into a once-weekly time they both can reliably make. The therapist doesn't have to be local for a weekend intensive. Some couples make it into a vacation.



The van der Veldees said they agreed to give up their confidentiality to talk about their experience because they want to help others. Both say they were stunned at how much the intensive improved their marriage and their lives.

“There’s been a ripple effect in our family,” says Erin van der Velde. “All three of our adult children have come to me at some point and said, ‘Mom, we are proud of how far you and dad have come.’”

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By *Laura L. Andro*

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