Home is where the heart is: Why we're getting couples therapy wrong

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

These days individuals often engage in a kind of self-evaluation in which their interactions, relationships, jobs and identities are placed under a microscope.

Larger questions such as "who am I?" and "who do I want to be?" have

arguably become the biggest life project of all. They require endless reflection and action to bring about personal change.

This so-called modern day phenomenon of the "project of the self" has its critics, with some arguing that an increased focus on individuals does little to account for culture or class, for example.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, there is a widespread belief that the inward gaze and "work done" on ourselves will improve our lives, happiness and intimate relationships.

The marketing of this concept can be seen in the so-called "self-help" literature, a billion-dollar industry in which people's romantic relationships, for example, are promised a blooming renaissance. It is no mistake that intimacy falls under the self-help banner, since the concept and patterns of romantic attachments are so embedded into therapeutic ideas of the self.

So what about couples therapy?

Much of what is undertaken in couples therapy draws from the therapeutic notion of self. It is designed to help struggling couples find common ground in the face of life's challenges. Therapy promises to unlock communicative blocks and, with it, all of the emotional attachments, meanings and tensions.

British sociologist Frank Furedi theorises that the turn to the therapeutic for a range of day-to-day issues is to the detriment of society. This means that instead of liberating individuals, therapy has become so much a part of the culture that it creates an "emotional deficit" in its wake.

Relationship breakdown remains a consistent feature of the modern era. Yet despite high divorce rates, Australian couples continue to formally

recognise their partnerships through marriage and other commitment ceremonies.

At the moment there are no meaningful ways to improve relationship quality aside from traditional counselling. Turning away from a deficit-led approach – one that focuses only on experiences with problematic relationships – means asking new research questions.

So instead of asking "what goes wrong?" for couples who separate, asking "what goes right for couples who continue in relationships?" has potential to offer new insights that can be applied to couples wishing to improve their relationship quality.

Enduring love study

In the UK, the Economic and Social Research Council funded a study that sought to understand how couples stay together in the 21st century. The survey from the UK study was then used in the US and Australia.

One of the key findings from the study was the importance of the seemingly mundane day-to-day gestures. Making your partner a cup of tea or cooking dinner, for example, were reported as positive relationship work.

Most participants in the Australian sample had some level of significant stress in their lives, with the majority having recently experienced a life-changing event such as major illness, redundancy or job loss. In light of this, it appears that the everyday gestures around the home provide a kind of inoculation against traumatic events.

It is also evident that couples see the home environment as the relationship crucible – the house is the site in which day-to-day decisions are made and household labour divided and lived out. In this context, the

home becomes the relationship site, and the flow of everyday interactions its lifeblood.

A new intervention?

Furedi's assertion of the emotional deficit model of self-evaluation links up with the contemporary treatment of couples "in trouble".

The ABC series Making Couples Happy, for example, saw a team of professionals working with couples on the brink of relationship breakdown. Though the "boot camp" format used some behavioural interventions, the professional involvement largely involved talking therapy and other psychological approaches.

Other social and historical factors such as the rise of the professional and the growth of counselling have had an impact on approaches to relationship problems.

Yet couples continue to see counsellors in the counselling room, rather than somewhere more revealing, such as the family home. If people were wanting to experience nature, they might drive in a car or walk. They could choose between the vacuum-like cabin of a car or the crunch of stones beneath their feet; the breeze moving the trees and their hair.

In the same way, relationships cannot properly be felt in the confines of the counselling room. The generic space of therapy cannot compare to the feeling of a relationship in its natural setting, where the flavour of interactions, the division of labour, the daily mundane activities are lived and symbolic gestures of love are forged.

So perhaps we have got couple therapy wrong. Drawing from what we know from the international study into long-term relationships, therapy should be informed by the resilience of those who have been able to

sustain long-term relationships and carried out in the home setting.

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