

Working With Harm

Practice Guidelines in Couples Counselling

In couples work, conflict and hurt are part of being human — but patterns of harm, coercive control, or abuse require careful, ethical handling. My role is to create a space where both partners can speak honestly, take responsibility, and work toward repair where it is possible and safe. These guidelines explain how I respond when harm is disclosed.

How I Understand Harm in Relationships

Relationships are imperfect and people hurt each other. However, there is a difference between:

1. Conflict or harm that can be acknowledged, repaired, and changed, and
2. Patterns of behaviour that are controlling, coercive, or abusive, where one person's safety, autonomy, or wellbeing is consistently compromised.

Key distinctions I pay attention to include:

- Capacity for responsibility (“I did this, and I want to understand and change it”)
- Patterns over time rather than isolated incidents
- Power dynamics and whether one partner feels unable to act freely
- Fear, intimidation, or consequences for speaking openly
- Whether repair is possible or safe

Harm caused to another person is never justified, even when the reasons behind it can be understood.

Identifying Harm and the Couples Therapy

Sometimes harm is clear, and sometimes it is confusing or mixed in with overwhelm, trauma responses, or long-standing patterns. Here are some pointers we all need to consider:

- If you are unsure whether something is “normal conflict” or harmful, we can explore it together. Confusion is common and welcome in the room.
- I respond kindly with understanding, although I have to make a judgement about safety and risk assess harm I do this with respect. Unless it is very clear someone is being abused I do not react quickly, I take time to listen.
- Clarity about meltdowns— these may come from nervous-system overload rather than deliberate intent, but the impact still matters if it caused harm to a

partner or child. The person who caused harm remains responsible for acknowledging it, repairing it, and working toward safer strategies.

- Both partners need to be able to speak freely — fear, withdrawal, or self-silencing can indicate an unsafe dynamic.
- Both partners need to take responsibility for the harm they caused— repair is only possible when accountability is present.
- Both partners need to work toward *agreed* therapeutic goals. If it becomes clear that these expectations cannot be met — for example, if one or both partners are unable or unwilling to take responsibility, engage safely, or work toward shared aims — I may decide to pause or end the couples work in order to maintain safety and ethical practice.

How I work when Harm or Abuse Is Disclosed

If harm — historical or recent — is disclosed by either partner, I will:

1. Acknowledge the harm
2. Explore the context: what happened, how often, the impact, is there ongoing fear
3. Consider ongoing safety and whether joint work remains possible, if not recommend individual support, slowing our work down, or signposting to other services
4. If it is safe and appropriate, continue couples therapy and support responsibility and repair

Regarding Confidentiality

Couples work involves shared confidentiality, meaning information may be brought into the joint space when it is shared individually. However, I may choose not to share disclosures from individual sessions or emails if doing so would be unsafe, or escalate harm.

In case of significant harm

I am unable to work with active cases of domestic violence and will end the couple's therapy.

I may offer individual sessions to the non-abused partner so they have immediate support in place and signpost the abusive partner to appropriate services

I will help create safety plans

I may need to escalate concerns to third parties such as social care, schools, or the police in line with safeguarding responsibilities.

If I believe there is an immediate risk to life or serious harm, I may contact emergency services. In situations where informing you could increase the risk of harm, I may make this call without prior notice.

I will discuss with my Clinical Supervisor which ensures that my decisions are grounded, ethical, and supported by professional oversight.

I am not a crisis service and if things escalate I may not be able to respond quickly outside of our usual arrangement.

For additional support

For Men

Men's Advice Line (Run by Respect)

Freephone: 0808 801 0327

Confidential emotional support, practical advice, and signposting for male victims of domestic abuse.

ManKind Initiative

<https://mankind.org.uk/>

Support for male victims of domestic abuse, including information on reporting, housing, and legal options.

For Women

National Domestic Abuse Helpline (Run by Refuge)

24/7 Freephone: 0808 2000 247

Provides confidential support, safety planning, and access to refuges.

Women's Aid

www.womensaid.org.uk

Website with live chat, safety planning tools, and a directory of local services. Supports women and children experiencing domestic abuse.