

Transcript Talking Therapies Episode 35:

How is your relationship power dynamic?

Suzy:

Hello and welcome to Talking Therapies, a podcast made together with Psychologies magazine and UK Council for Psychotherapy or UKCP for short. I'm Suzie Walker, and I'm the Editor-in-Chief of Psychologies. Each month on Talking Therapies, we will be talking to a UKCP therapist about a range of topics. Many couples struggle at some point with issues of power or control, but where there is power inequality, there is imbalance. Can you learn to effectively share power for your relationship to survive?

Hannah:

For both people to want therapy for their relationship is important. Of course, one person can get their partner to come along for therapy. But if the other person doesn't want it, then that's going to be problematic and that says something about the potential for the relationship itself, I suppose.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Nicholas Rose. Prior to training as a psychotherapist, Nicholas spent 15 years working in marketing and strategy. Since 2003, he has worked psychotherapeutically in private practice for a range of organisations, including Freedom from Torture and Hackney Mind. He often contributes to media publications and has made screen appearances on Sky News and My Naked Secret. In this episode, UKCP CEO Sarah Niblock sits down with UKCP psychotherapist Nicholas Rose, to find out how psychotherapeutic support can help couples affected by power struggles.

Sarah:

Nicholas, can you define power in the context of relationships?

Nicholas:

Thank you, Sarah, that's a really good question. There's a lot of interest at the moment around power in relationships, the Me Too movement, Black Lives Matter. And also, as we have debates around the power of the state at the moment, for example, regards to COVID. So, there's an awful lot of focus on the issue of power. But yes, when we're talking about power today, I'm thinking about power in the relationship you have with your partner, or wife, husband, spouse, yes, and then looking at how to understand the issue of power in it. So, if we look at power, from a sort of definition point of view, I always quite like to do that, power can be seen in two ways. There's our way of being so our ability, our capacity to do something or act in a particular way. And then there's also power in terms of influence or directing behaviour of others. And so, there are two very, very different things. And so, when people come to therapy, to talk about power in relationships, the question will be really about, are we talking about conflicting ways of being? Or are we talking about a use of power, which is, if you like, harmful?

Sarah:

And how do power issues arise?

Nicholas:

I think that they're always there from the start, that we have different ways of being. And so, when we first meet, somebody we'll be aware of how they behave differently to us, that might be what attracts us to them. Maybe they're very calm and collected, or maybe they're very energetic and very outspoken. Our relationships are great places to learn. But what can happen, of course, is that the two ways of being, ours and a partner's can come into conflict when we're trying to navigate life on a day-to-day basis, or at times of particular stress. So quite often, a disturbance, I think I would call it, in the comfort of the relationship can reveal itself after some event. So, it could be something like an illness, or bereavement, or redundancy, or any number of things. But yes, the response of the two people in the relationship, how they respond, can, instead of bringing them together, can put space and disconnect them.

Sarah:

And how does that reveal itself, Nicholas? In what ways do power struggles affect couples?

Nicholas:

So usually, it's quite subtle at first, quite nuanced. And there's always a bit of a confusion because relationships, they naturally go through a sort of cycle. Some people talk about storming, forming and norming. So, at the start of a relationship that can be quite intense, quite passionate, quite emotional, quite relational, we have a lot of energy being put by both partners into looking after the other and trying to find a way of working in the relationship. And then over time, of course, focus is sort of naturally diverted elsewhere. So, people can start to wonder, is this as it should be or not? And if there's a failure in the communication – failure, whatever that word failure is not so nice – but if the communication could be better, so the couple can talk about these experiences as they occur, then that's really helpful. So, to answer your question, it's often revealed by small discomforts on either side, you know, some negative thinking or some difficult feelings, and they can escalate if they're not addressed. And of course, going further down the line, issues that are not addressed can result in much more difficult conflicts, that it can result in some more abusive behaviours. But also, things like infidelity can occur as well. It's usually on an escalation. And of course, as a relationship therapist, we mainly see couples when there is a significant escalation in the relationship and the difficulties.

Sarah:

If you've been in a long-term relationship with someone, these things can sometimes creep up on you. And you may be so used to the power dynamics in your relationship, you might not necessarily know there's a problem. I'm just wondering how you can work out whether the power dynamics are unhealthy in your relationship. Is there a kind of way that we can assess that for ourselves?

Nicholas:

Well, I always quite like to take a step back in a way and think about a concept, that if a relationship is not working for one, then the relationship is not working. And so, I think that can be a really helpful benchmark for a couple to think about, and to discuss, and to question. Is our relationship working for both of us? Does it work for me? Does it work for you? If you're both committed and open to keeping that as a kind of a question and something for debate, then I think that's about being able to keep an awareness around the strength and the health of the relationship.

Sarah:

I think one question that's probably on a lot of listeners minds is how best to even broach the subject of couples therapy with their partner. It's quite a big thing to perhaps introduce into relationship and maybe the other partner thinks everything's absolutely fine. So, I wondered if you had any suggestions or guidance for someone who might wish to perhaps introduce that concept.

Nicholas:

Yes, this is a really difficult issue for many people. And I suppose at this point is really worth making a distinction between relationships where there is abuse and relationships which are struggling. So, if there is physical violence, sexual abuse in a relationship, then the important thing is to take action on that to get away from that situation. And during the pandemic, of course, there's been lots of focus on increasing domestic violence. There is the Boots Project where you can go there and gain access to help lines and support organisations, things like that. But of course, really what we're talking about today, and for 95% of cases where people come to therapy, it is about a relationship which was working, or a relationship which has just started, which has the potential to work really well, where people want a relationship to form in a healthy way, or about ending a relationship in a good way. For both people to want therapy for their relationship is important. Of course, one person can get their partner to come along for therapy. But if the other person doesn't want it, then that's going to be problematic, and that says something about the potential for the relationship itself, I suppose. So, in terms of if you want your partner to go to therapy with you, the important thing is to say that you're not comfortable, and you don't feel completely comfortable in the relationship. And it's not that you're saying the other person is doing anything wrong. But there's something that's happening in the relationship, which you could do with help with. The problem exists because the relationship exists. It's natural for people to find outside help. But of course, there's also a lot of relationships which people navigate quite sort of happily in the early stages. But what things I would say is, I think people's attitude to couple's work is a little bit behind people's attitudes to therapy generally. So, whilst there's more acceptance nowadays, of people taking themselves individually, or suggesting to their friends, family that therapy might be helpful for them individually, quite often, when people bring their relationship to therapy, there's been an awful lot of hurt, an awful lot of difficult situations, which means that there's a lot of work involved. I often find myself wishing that people would have been able to come sooner than they do.

Sarah:

I just wonder what kind of role you play as that third person in that relationship during the therapeutic process.

Nicholas:

So, two parts, I suppose really, two thoughts about this. The first is that in going to see a therapist as a couple, something is going to be different, just from the fact that you're going to sit in a different space with another person. So that's going to do something to how the two of you are together and individually. So just that change of context is important initially. And then there is the role of the therapist as well, I tend to think of myself as performing one of three roles, either sort of as a mediator, facilitator or referee, quite often. So, I will look and see which of those roles I'm performing most, because sometimes it's a bit of all three. And then I'll try and make that explicit for the couple and say, 'oh, I realise' or 'do you realise that I tend to referee quite a lot? And when did you start to need a referee? Or did you use to be able to referee yourselves'. So, in terms of bringing out the role that I'm playing, what I am aiming to do, really is to enable the couple to reintegrate that particular skill, if you like back into their relationship, so they don't need me anymore. I'm working to lose my job basically with them, is how I was looking at it. And one of the things I will ask at the end of the first session is, 'is this different for you being here? Is your communication different? Is something feeling different? Is something happening that's different in you being in this space?' And if the answer is yes, then it means that we've got some potential to do something. If the answer is no, it's always like this and there's been absolutely no difference whatsoever, then of course, that's a question about what other options might be available. If people come and see me, the first thing I will ask is how it is they've come to see me, I won't ask one person, I'll put the question out there, then I see who responds to that question. So, I give people space and see what they do with it and then I make sure that we develop an understanding of what's happening in the space and how that relates to their relationship, and what the significance of that might be. So, I look to see the perspectives on both sides. I like to think about having two people with two different ways of being in the room with me, and how a dynamic is created by the two of them trying and committing to being in the relationship together. So, what happens from that? And what can help them improve their relationship?

Sarah:

I wondered then in that therapeutic relationship, say, there's three of you in that room, whether it's physical or virtual. Do they have anything to fear? Who holds the power when you've got that new triumvirate there?

Nicholas:

Yes, good question. As psychotherapists that have gone through the training that the UKCP requires for registration, then we will be looking very carefully ourselves to see what we are doing and what power we're holding and what power we're not holding, and how we're being viewed. And so, our power will be something which we will be bearing in mind. And that's important because we don't take sides, there's no point for a couple coming to see a therapist who is going to take sides, because the defenses of the person who is feeling as though a side as being taken will rise, and they will shut down basically. So, it'll be the opposite of something that is useful. So, as UKCP therapists, we've gone through such a long period of training and experiential work that we'll be keeping a close eye on how we are in the room. If your partner wants you to go for therapy, and you're nervous about it, a really helpful way to think about this is that there should be a first session. And the first session should give time and space for all three people to be able to say, 'okay, I feel comfortable in this, I think we can speak openly here, and it feels like a space where we can look at things in a calmer way. We can have conversations that we're not currently having'. So, the first session is an opportunity to check that out. And then all the way through, the clients are in control basically, they are the clients. The therapy can be ended at any time, given the agreement that you have with the therapist. So, both partners are in control during the therapy. We can start to attach significance to things that which makes sense of our hurt, even though they don't really make sense in the context of the relationship and the other person. That we can try and find places for our hurt. That's where the blame comes into things. And that's where people get nervous, that they're going to be blamed, they're doing something wrong, and that they need to change, and they might not be able to. And that's very rarely the actual reality that I find in therapy.

Sarah

I'm going to whether people are also perhaps too embarrassed to come to a psychotherapist. And I would imagine, Nicholas, that you and your UKCP colleagues have heard it all, there isn't any chance of shocking a psychotherapist, is there?

Nicholas:

Never say never. But yes, I mean the process of therapy and the way in which we engage in therapy, as therapists, is that we're looking to explore something. And we use the same tools to explore the thing. We want to know how someone thinks about it, how they feel about it, how they experience it. We do get a particular kind of expertise, I suppose, or skill or experience in particular things such as anxiety, or autism, or infidelity, or whatever it might be. But I guess the fact that we're focusing on the process, means that the thing itself is less important. For me as a therapist, I just want to get in there, I want to know what it is that's the concern. Because once we can start talking about it, we can start to deal with it. And so, in couples therapy, for example, I'll notice if we're not talking about sex, and I'll want to bring that up, I'll say, 'oh, I notice we're not talking about intimacy, or about sex' and see what the couple does with that, they might say, 'oh, we don't need to, we don't want to'. But most often, if it's not been mentioned, and I've spotted it is not being mentioned, then there'll be a sense of relief from someone, on one side, that 'oh, actually, we're going to be able to talk about this because we haven't'. People will be nervous about bringing things up, but of course, the therapist has a good role to play in sort of showing really, signifying, you know, bring it on, really, this is what we need to do. There were two programmes on the BBC that really caught my attention around relationships. So, the reason why they caught my attention in relation to what we're talking about, is that they really bring into a sharp focus, I think, how relationships can struggle. Either because there's two different ways of being, so two people with two different ways of being, that are really struggling to come together and to communicate and be understood. And then there's also the situations in relationships which are about poor boundaries, about maybe even abuse, about asserting power in terms of trying to get the other person to do something differently. Anyway, so these two programmes that really caught my attention, were Normal People, and also, I May Destroy You. So Normal People, I just so wanted to be their couple's therapist, I just so wanted to help them to speak more openly to each other, to be able to question the incidents that cause them pain. You know, to be able to say, 'oh, when you did that, when you said that, I thought this, or I thought that'. To clear up those misunderstandings. So, for Normal People, I could so see a role for a couple's therapist with that. And then in I May Destroy You, I thought that was an amazing look at issues around relationship formation and consent and boundaries. And both of those programmes, I could see that there was a sort of almost a therapeutic journey, that what you came out of those programmes with, was sort of an understanding of how things could go wrong, and what you could do differently. So, if anyone's struggling in their relationships, either one of those programmes, I think, could be quite helpful to put a bit of understanding on, you know, what can often go wrong. And does that relate to what's happening in their relationship?

Sarah:

If somebody's listening to this, who is struggling with the power dynamics in their relationship? Is there a kind of first step or piece of advice that you would give to them?

Nicholas:

If you rule out that there is abuse in the relationship, because if you're in a violent relationship, then you just really need to take action. After that, what I would suggest, as a first step, is to start to keep a record of the incidents that are causing you pain. And what I mean by that is keep a factual record. For example, we agreed to meet at seven o'clock, and he didn't, or she didn't show up until eight o'clock. And so, keep a record of those actual, factual incidents, which are causing pain, because that's where, in the therapy, we will want to get to.

Sarah:

I think that most couples must struggle, at some point with issues of power and control, whether they realise it or not. And I think that that's going to lead to imbalance at various times in our relationships. And I think you've set out so well and so reassuringly how psychotherapy can help couples to kind of rebalance and take their relationship to the next level. And it doesn't have to be threatening or scary, but there's absolute wonderful expertise there to be found on the UKCP register, if people want to take that step. So, thank you very much, Nicholas, for your expertise.

Nicholas:

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about the work.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Nicholas Rose, speaking to Sarah Niblock, the CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy. If after listening to that, you feel you could benefit from some talking time with a psychotherapist then go to the Find a therapist section of the UKCP website and have a look through. The website address is www.psychotherapy.org.uk and look for the Find a Therapist tab. We'll also be discussing power dynamics in Psychologies magazine this month, or you can find us online at www.psychologies.co.uk. We'll be doing a podcast each month with some of the UKCPs psychotherapists. So, remember to like and subscribe to our channel to at first. It also helps others to find us too. So, join us again next month. Till then thank you for listening and take good care of yourselves.