

# Engaging business to support relationships:

a report by the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships





# Introduction and context

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Troublesome personal and family relationships are a top cause of employee stress, yet it seems that many companies and organisations fail to support staff appropriately. During December 2012 and January 2013 the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships conducted an online survey ('Employers and relationship support') of senior HR staff working in London-based companies, receiving responses from 233 of those approached.

Because relationship distress seems to undermine work performance, one might be forgiven for assuming it to be an area which all organisations see as a priority to address. Moreover, given that one in every five senior HR managers believe that relationship problems among their staff are becoming more common (and virtually none regard the incidence of such problems as diminishing), it would be reasonable to assume that the HR sector would attempt to counter such a phenomenon with reference to the latest evidence-base approaches.

Not so, it seems, at least according to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, who estimate that 'more than a quarter of organisations that report stress as one of the top five causes of absence are not taking any steps to address it' (CIPD, 2012). Our own survey confirms these results as respondents report that employers, on the whole, do not see the provision of interventions for relationship distress as being their responsibility.

This state of affairs should concern us as couple relationship distress is known to have many negative impacts. It is associated with individual psychological disorders (Whisman et al., 2000) such as depression (Beach, 1986) (Culp, 1998) and also with poor work performance (Forthofer et al., 1996), according to a recent review of couple therapy effectiveness (Snyder, 2012).

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Recent research also shows that conditions such as depression – which has been ranked in the top 10 of health conditions to affect workplace costs, and which manifest especially in the form of presenteeism – are 'far more costly than employers have previously realized' (Loeppke, 2009). But it has been estimated that 60% of those with depression attribute relationship problems as the main cause for their illness (O'Leary, Riso & Beach, 1990; Rounsaville et al., 1979). The links between relationship distress, depression and loss of productivity are therefore clear.

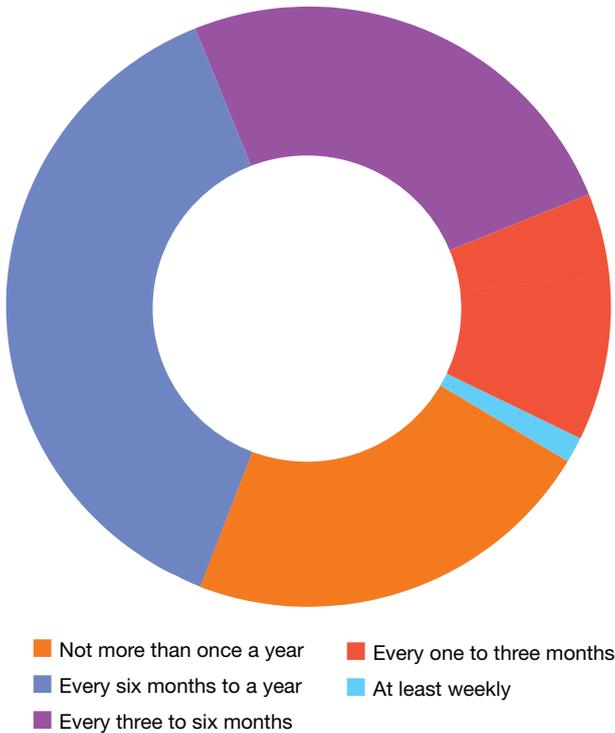
It may also be surprising for employers to learn that couple relationship distress – particularly conflict between partners – is also linked to poor physical health (Snyder, 2012) (TCCR, 2011). Relationship conflict has directly adverse effects on cardiovascular, endocrine, immune, neurosensory and other physiological systems that, in turn, contribute to physical health problems (Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton, 2001) (Snyder, 2012). It is therefore important that employers do not under-estimate the prospect for relationship distress to be the driving factor in a number of physical health problems which ultimately result in reduced productivity and increased absenteeism.

And yet, despite such research evidence which suggests that it is in employers' best interests to do what they can to support employees with relationship difficulties, employers do not see interventions for relationship distress as either their responsibility or something which their employees are calling for them to provide. This is despite the fact that almost 95% of those who responded to TCCR's survey either agreed or strongly agreed that employees' couple relationships difficulties affect work performance.

TCCR's survey shows that more than a third of employers say that they come across an employment issue which is in some way related to an employee's relationship with their partner between every one to six months. And two out of five employers judge that they encounter this phenomenon every six months to a year (see Figure 1). Given this, it would appear that significant numbers of people are having couple relationship problems which affect their work.

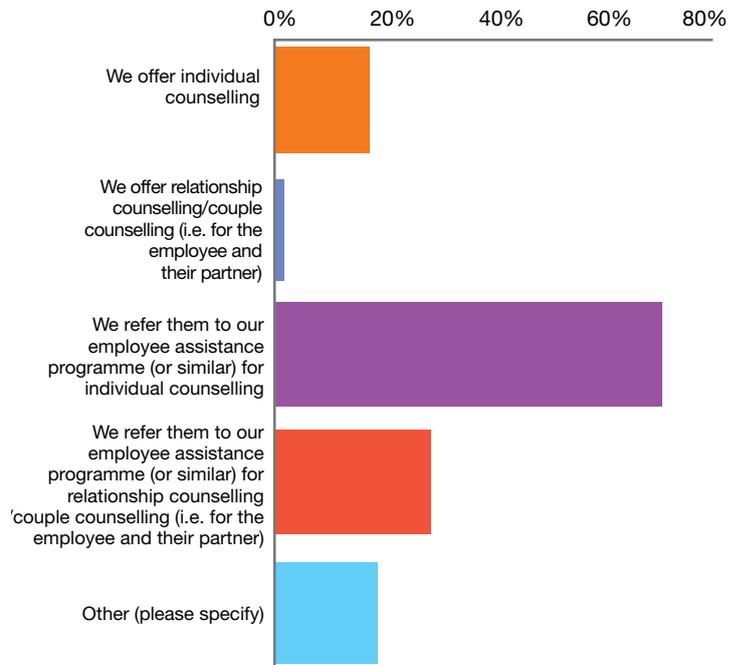
**Figure 1**

On average how often do you come across an employee issue which you feel is in some way related to that employee's relationship with their partner?



**Figure 2**

How does your organisation support staff in this situation?



### How do employers react to these kinds of difficulties?

TCCR's survey indicates that while 29% of employers will refer employees to couple counselling, the vast majority (71%) refer on to individual therapy. This suggests that employers choose to provide individual counselling interventions in response to the relationship difficulties which their employees encounter. However, evidence suggests that individual counselling is less effective for relationship difficulties than couple approaches (Beach, 1992) (Emanuel-Zuurveen, 1996).

Respondents to the survey believe that there is insufficient call from their employees for couple counselling services to be provided through work yet, tellingly, 47% of employers indicated that they do not see it as their role to provide this service for their employees (see Figure 2).

The reasons for this difference in attitude to the provision of individual and couple therapy may be complex. They may reflect a lack of familiarity with the evidence base for the effectiveness of couple therapy (10% of respondents indicated this as an explanatory factor), and may also point to a lack of awareness about couple therapy as an intervention per se. However, it probably bears out findings from previous research which shows that there appears to be a high degree of social stigma attached to admitting, and seeking help for, relationships problems. Research commissioned by the Department of Education indicates that there is a widely held belief that relationships are private and not to be discussed with strangers, with many people feeling it is more socially acceptable to keep relationships 'under wraps' and 'behind closed doors' (Walker et al, 2010). Indeed, the government is so concerned about the stigma issue that it has recently provided funding in order to 'change attitudes to seeking relationship support'.

For while it may be becoming more socially acceptable to admit – as an individual – that one is 'stressed' at

1 During December 2012 and early January 2013 the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships carried out an online survey of senior HR staff or other senior members of staff working in London-based companies entitled 'Employers and relationship support'. The survey, which contained nine questions, was sent to 3,716 professionals and received responses from 233 of those approached (a response rate of 7.5% (639 of the original sample failed to be delivered))

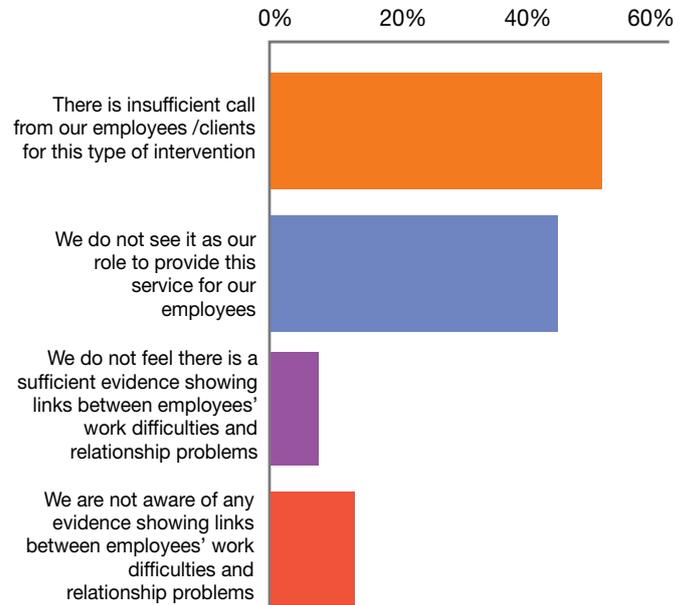
work or even ‘depressed’, admitting to difficulties in one’s relationships is something which people may be far more reluctant to do in their workplace. This attitude, TCCR suggests, is damaging for employees and for the companies and organisations that employ them.

In our survey we asked whether employers – if they were presented with compelling evidence about the links between employees’ work performance and couple relationship problems – would be more likely to consider providing more relationship support. Almost half of respondents agreed that this would lead them to consider their organisation beginning to offer relationship counselling/couple counselling to their employees (either directly or through an EAP) (See Figure 3). In addition, nearly two thirds of respondents indicated that demand from employees for this kind of service would lead their organisation to consider providing it, which suggests there is both a lack of expressed demand from employees and a lack of awareness of the efficacy of couple therapy for a wide range of relationship-induced distress. It should also be emphasised that the fact that employers report there being low demand for a particular service does not mean that take-up would be low were the service to be freely available. Indeed, it is probable that the taboo on both being open about relationship problems and addressing them through couple therapy is shared by both employees and employers – a taboo which no doubt impacts negatively on productivity, output and creativity in the workplace.



**Figure 3**

If your organisation does not offer relationship counselling (either or through an EAP) please tell us why.



It is our view that responses to this survey indicate a clear need for information about the effectiveness of couple therapy to be made more widely available to HR professionals and other senior staff in the workplace; and that employers need to offer relationship support alongside a range of other benefits.

**Brief overview of evidence on efficacy of couple therapy**

A comprehensive review of the current status of evidence-based couple therapy (Snyder, 2012) provides the most up-to-date and authoritative picture of this type of intervention’s effectiveness.

2 In a study comparing individual behavioural-cognitive therapy with marital therapy for depression in maritally distressed couples ‘the effect on the relationship is significantly stronger in couples who were tested by marital therapy compared with patients who were treated individually’, albeit that ‘both individual cognitive-behaviour therapy and marital therapy lead to less depressive complaints, and both treatment conditions have a positive effect on the relationship’ (Emanuels-Zuurveen, 1996).

### Snyder's review finds that:

- several approaches to couple therapy produce statistically and clinically significant reductions in relationship distress (Lebow et al., 2012; Snyder et al., 2006)
- the impact of couple therapy is similar to that of the most effective psychological and pharmacological treatments available for individual psychological disorders (Shadish and Baldwin, 2003).
- treating a couple with behavioural couples therapy (BCT) means that that couple will be better off than nearly three-quarters of untreated couples (Shadish and Baldwin, 2005)
- emotion-focused couple therapy (EFCT) is superior to a waiting list control group in reducing relationship distress (Johnson, 2002).
- IBCT (integrative behavioral couples therapy) and traditional BCT produce a similar level of clinically significant improvement at the end of the treatment and show a continuing benefit at a 5-year follow up (Christensen et al., 2010)' (Snyder, 2012).

### In other studies:

- insight-oriented couple therapy and BCT both show statistically and clinically significant gains in relationship satisfaction compared to a waiting list control group (Snyder and Wills (1989), with couples receiving insight orientated therapy faring appreciably better than those receiving BCT in terms of divorce rates at follow-up after 4 years (Snyder et al., 1991).
- integrated systemic couple therapy (ISCT - which seeks to disrupt repetitive, self-perpetuating negative interactional cycles by changing the meaning attributed to these cycles) and emotion focussed couple therapy are both superior to the control condition and equally effective in alleviating relationship distress (Goldman and Greenberg, 1992).
- couple therapy is effective in reducing existing relationship distress (e.g. (Baucom et al. (1998); (Crowe (2000); (Emmelkamp et al. (1984))
- couple therapy is more effective than CBT, antidepressant medication and individual psychotherapy (Bodermann et al. (2008); Leff et al., (2000)) in treating depression.

As a result of this strong evidence base, couples therapy is now a NICE-recommended treatment for depression (NICE, 2009) and one which is delivered through the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme (see (Hewison, 2011) for a description of couple therapy for depression).

While relatively little research has been conducted on the impact of couple therapy on employee productivity, a report which estimates the social return on investment of TCCR's services indicates that productivity can be increased, as well as substantial costs to the labour market avoided, through the provision of couple therapy for couples experiencing relationships difficulties which manifest themselves at work (NEF, 2012).



# Case studies

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## Case study 1

Kate's 20-year marriage hit the rocks when she discovered her husband Brian had been having an affair with a close friend. She was deeply distressed and, at 53, felt humiliated that she seemingly wasn't enough for her husband. Luckily, she was allowed to take time off from her work at a leading estate agency and property rental company, where she'd been working for the previous 10 years.

After a week, she returned, claiming she was over the shock and hoped work would distract her from her troubles at home. It soon became clear to colleagues that Kate was not coping. She would be late for viewings, careless with paperwork. She lost two sets of keys and double-booked appointments with prospective clients.

Her boss suggested she take more time off but Kate refused. She insisted she felt fine, downplayed the mistakes at work and put on a brave face, saying she would deal with her husband when she was good and ready.

However, Kate's performance at work continued to deteriorate. After she lost an important client due to being late for consecutive viewings, the company's HR manager suggested that she take advantage of some sessions of individual counselling which the company could provide through their employee assistance programme. Kate grudgingly accepted this offer.

However, despite attending the six sessions on offer, and beginning to explore the unacknowledged sadness she had felt for many years about her marriage, Kate's hitherto exemplary levels of professionalism continued to desert her.

A colleague, who had suffered difficulties in her marriage, suggested to Kate that she and Brian might benefit from some counselling together. Initially sceptical, Kate subsequently approached her HR manager to enquire whether this kind of help might be available through them. On being told that it wasn't, Kate explored her options. The only local provider of couple counselling could offer Kate and Brian a subsidised afternoon session at a cost of £40 (there was a waiting list for evening sessions and they cost £65). Kate therefore approached her employer to see whether she might be granted some time off to attend these afternoon sessions. However, her employer refused, saying that this was a private matter between Kate and her partner. Kate and Brian put their name on a waiting list for the more expensive evening session. However, during the four months it took before an evening vacancy became available, Kate's performance and rather erratic behaviour at work deteriorated to such a point that she was taken off face-to-face client work and moved to a more administrative role.

When, eventually, Kate and Brian began couple therapy, Kate spent most of the initial session in tears. It had been six months since Brian's confession but they were yet to talk about it. Brian had had two previous affairs in the past and Kate admitted she had been unhappy for a long time, but she had kept her sadness to herself. She'd grown up in a military household with three older, high-achieving sisters. Her parents' mantra was that you should be able to cope with anything life threw your way and get on without complaining, making it hard for Kate to ask for help.

For many years her job had been a source of respite and she was proud of her skills and efficiency. Kate was a successful estate agent. She enjoyed the work and the chance to forget her stressful home life.

Understandably, Kate hated that her colleagues now knew she'd apparently failed at being a wife and had been all the more determined not to be seen to fail at work too but, in initially refusing help, she'd made things harder. Gradually

as Kate and Brian sorted things out with the help of the couples counsellor she realised she could begin to trust her colleagues not to judge her or tease her. She started being more open and honest with them, admitting that she was finding life quite hard. Tension at work eased and Kate and her colleagues re-built their mutual trust and began working well again, resuming her previous client-facing role.

Kate and Brian are still in therapy. He's desperately repentant and keen to recommit, and the couple are working out whether they can understand what went wrong between them.

However, she has been left with the feeling that her employer could have done more to help her through this difficult period. She feels that a lot of time was wasted, and that neither she nor the company benefitted from the delay that she had to experience before getting the appropriate help that she and her partner so badly needed.

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## Case study 2

David and Charlotte were in their late 30s with three children under six. They had been married 12 years. Charlotte had been head of litigation at a big law firm, but had recently left to look after the children. David was an accountant. They started seeing a couple counsellor after Charlotte discovered David was on the brink of being fired. She was furious he'd kept this from her, complained he was useless and unreliable.

David admitted in the sessions that he'd been given two verbal warnings after colleagues complained of aggressive and unreasonable behaviour. One more and he would lose his job.

David told the counsellor he couldn't explain his behaviour and admitted it was out of character. He'd been at the firm 15 years, enjoyed his job and had, until recently, been very popular.

In the sessions David was far from the aggressive bully his colleagues reported him to be. He was quiet, timid and would defer to Charlotte. David had supported her decision to stop working, but felt things had changed since Charlotte was at home all the time.

Charlotte ruled the home like she did her department at work. She was methodical, demanding and controlling. Nothing was done or decided on without her approval. David had prided himself on being a hands-on dad and enjoyed putting the children to bed when he got home. But Charlotte had introduced a new routine and now they were all asleep by the time David returned home. He would get them ready in the morning but this often prompted arguments as Charlotte complained he didn't do small things 'properly'.

David admitted he now felt redundant at home. Charlotte had everything under control and didn't even need David's income as she had saved money for this planned period of her career. She didn't need him sexually either, now she had the three kids she'd always hoped to have.

Over a total of 20 sessions it became clear David's problems at work were actually caused by problems at home. He was furious at Charlotte. But, unable to stand up to her, just as he'd never challenged his overbearing mother, David had re-directed his frustration and anger instead at his work colleagues.

Gradually David learned to challenge Charlotte more and in doing so it became clear how anxious Charlotte was about her new role too. She admitted to being less confident than she appeared and began to understand her controlling behaviour as a symptom of her uncertainty about whether she could really be a good wife and mother. Taking this role full-time had made her feel that she had to be 100% perfect, just like she had felt she had had to be as a senior lawyer. As they talked she began to welcome David's help. Their sex life slowly resumed.

In turn, David became happier and more relaxed at work. So were his colleagues. Two weeks before the counselling ended, he was promoted.

# Conclusion

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Relationship difficulties – a significant source of stress and depression – are associated with poor work performance. Such difficulties can, however, be effectively treated through couple counselling.

Social attitudes towards this type of evidence-based intervention are still somewhat conflicted though, with a significant degree of stigma attached to both the admission of, and seeking of help for, relationship difficulties.

Such a state of affairs affords HR professionals and other senior managers the opportunity to take a lead in two ways: first by familiarising themselves with the considerable benefits of this kind of intervention; and second by ensuring that it becomes standard practice for the couple relationship dimension to be given due consideration when assessing and assisting an employee who is struggling at work. TCCR is calling for relationship support in general and couple therapy in particular to be a key aspect of all EAP provision.

We also call for HR professionals who have responsibility for the wellbeing of employees to have training to enable them to feel comfortable addressing this area of difficulty so that employees, in turn, can feel comfortable sharing such problems in order that the right help can be sought and provided.

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Were such developments in practice to be more widely adopted they have the potential to significantly lessen the reluctance which many employees feel to owning up to difficulties in their personal lives; a reluctance which is counterproductive for both employees and employers alike, given the consequences in terms of reduced productivity, and increased levels of absenteeism and presenteeism, as workers struggle with difficulties for which effective treatments are available.

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The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships provides a comprehensive range of affordable counselling services for couples and individuals facing relationship problems.

Through its clinical, training and research programmes it supports and improves services to couples and families.

From Central London and the City we operate high quality counselling and psychotherapy services in a safe and confidential environment. Our services are offered on a sliding scale and we aim to see everyone who approaches us, whatever their income. Our experienced therapists aim to help people get their relationships back on track so that it can be a partnership from which they can grow and develop.

Our services also include help for parents who need support to work together effectively for the sake of their children, as well as specialised help for those going through divorce and separation or those facing specific problems in their sexual relationship.

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