What Does Working at Depth Mean?

Working at depth means being able to see and understand where your difficulties really come from, rather than simply focusing on the problems you are experiencing today.

The best way to explain this is through examples. But first, it is important to understand something about what makes couples therapy successful.

In my experience, the success of couples work depends on two essential factors: the willingness and desire of both people to learn, grow and find a way to be together, and the breadth of knowledge, experience and skill of the therapist.

Without both, therapy can end up focusing on what is actually a symptom, mistakenly believing it to be the cause.

One of the most important distinctions in couples work is being able to separate what is being created between you in the relationship from what is being triggered between you but already exists within each of you. These are not the same thing.

We all carry old patterns, habits, emotional responses and ways of protecting ourselves. Many of these developed long ago, at a different time in our lives, for reasons that may once have made perfect sense.

But those same patterns can continue operating in our adult relationships, often without us realising it.

If these deeper influences are missed, it may not matter how much you talk, how hard you try or how much effort you put into changing things. The underlying forces remain invisible, continuing to shape your reactions, your feelings and the way you relate to one another.

And this is the crucial point: these are not necessarily conscious choices.

They are deeply embedded ways of responding, shaped by earlier experiences and woven into our nervous system, emotional life and personality. We don't simply decide to react this way. Often, the reaction happens before we have even had time to think.

But what has been learned can also be understood and changed. That is where my work comes in.

My job is to help you see what you haven't been able to see, to understand what is really driving the difficulties between you, and to distinguish the problems that belong to the relationship from those that have their roots in earlier experiences.

This is why it is possible to resolve difficulties that have continued for years, sometimes despite enormous effort and previous attempts to make things better.

Because, often for the first time, the real reasons behind those difficulties become visible and understood.

And once you can see what has been happening, you are no longer simply fighting the same problems over and over again. You have the possibility of changing what has been creating and sustaining them.

Example 1: When the Argument Isn’t Really About the Diary

A couple came to see me after spending six months working with another therapist and feeling they were getting nowhere.

Most of their arguments centred around a shared diary, which they used to organise their individual time off and make sure one of them was always available to look after their daughter.

They had spent months arguing about his failure to put his plans in the diary in time, and her reactions when he didn't. Despite repeatedly discussing the problem in therapy, nothing had really changed.

When I met them, I took a brief history and then watched and listened carefully to what happened between them as they talked about the diary.

What became clear was that the diary wasn't really the problem. It was the place where something much deeper was playing out.

He was repeating patterns that had developed much earlier in his life. He struggled to speak up for himself, experienced his wife as uncaring and dominating, and then withdrew into an angry silence.

His wife, in turn, felt hurt and frustrated. She tried different ways to reach him, but her attempts to maintain a perfectly reasonable boundary were experienced by him as further evidence that she didn't care.

They were caught in a pattern neither of them fully understood.

So I worked on two things simultaneously.

First, I changed the way they structured their conversations, helping them communicate with greater clarity and empathy, so that both could feel heard and understood.

Second, I helped him move beyond his anger and withdrawal to recognise and express the feelings underneath.

For the first time, he began to see what was happening inside him. He learned to recognise the moment he was being pulled into an old response, to step out of it and remain emotionally present rather than disappearing into silence.

He was finally able to tell his wife something he had struggled to put into words: that deep down, he often felt she didn't care about him, that she dominated their relationship, and that he experienced her manner as too strong and sometimes lacking in kindness.

And importantly, some of what he was saying had truth in it. Not everything was simply a reaction from his past. There were aspects of how they related to one another that also needed to change.

This is why being able to distinguish what is triggered from the past from what is actually happening in the present is so important.

Once they could see and understand both, they were no longer trapped in the same argument.

They combined that deeper understanding with new communication skills and began making real progress.

They never argued about the diary again.

The problem they had spent six months trying to solve was not, at its heart, a problem about organising their time. It was about feelings, experiences and patterns that had remained invisible until we began working at depth.

Example 2: When Two People's Old Wounds Keep Hurting Each Other

We are all born with fundamental relational needs. The need to feel loved, valued, cared for, understood and important to someone else doesn't disappear as we grow older. These needs remain with us from cradle to grave.

A couple came to see me because neither felt valued or cared for by the other. Over time, they had drifted into emotional distance, with both continually feeling hurt and disappointed.

When he became angry or upset, he would walk away. But rather than recovering and returning to the relationship, he would remain angry, silent and deeply hurt, sometimes for days.

As we began exploring what was happening between them, I could see that some of her behaviour was chaotic and unpredictable for him. He often felt left to pick up the pieces, and this was a genuine difficulty in their relationship.

But there was more going on beneath the surface.

Every time they tried to address something that was making either of them unhappy, they ended up in the same painful place. Nothing seemed to get resolved, and both were left feeling increasingly hurt.

Over the following weeks, a deeper picture began to emerge.

His anger and hurt were partly a response to his wife's lack of consideration. But the intensity of his feelings was also connected to experiences from much earlier in his life. Old, buried hurt was being brought to the surface in his relationship with his wife.

For her, something different was happening.

She struggled with boundaries and could be chaotic in how she managed things. But underneath this was a deep sense of worthlessness rooted in her own early experiences.

Each time she tried to get things right for him and failed, she felt even more worthless. The harder she tried, the more painful it became when things went wrong.

They were caught in a vicious cycle in which each person's way of coping was triggering the other's deepest vulnerabilities.

She would try to make things better, but her difficulties with boundaries and organisation meant that things often went wrong.

He would experience this as a lack of care and consideration, triggering both his present frustration and much older feelings of hurt.

He would then withdraw into anger and silence, sometimes for days.

His withdrawal reinforced her sense that she was failing and wasn't good enough. So she would try again, often with even greater anxiety and urgency, only for the same pattern to repeat itself.

Neither was deliberately trying to hurt the other. Both wanted to feel loved and valued. But the very ways they were responding to their own pain were creating more pain for each other.

The real problem wasn't simply her chaotic behaviour or his anger and withdrawal. It was the collision of two sets of old patterns, each continually reinforcing the other.

This is what we needed to understand and change.

We made these patterns visible, helped each of them understand what was happening inside themselves and between them, and changed the way they thought about and responded to one another.

Rather than seeing each other as the source of all their pain, they began to recognise the deeper forces shaping their relationship.

And with that understanding, they were able to respond differently.

They had been living with these difficulties for years and had already spent time in therapy. The patterns had continued for around six years.

Yet once we understood what was really happening and combined that understanding with changes in how they related to each other, the difficulties could finally be resolved.

What had seemed like years of separate arguments and disappointments was, at its heart, one repeating pattern that neither of them had previously been able to see.

That is what working at depth makes possible.

Example 3: When Anger Hides Hurt

A couple came to see me because almost every time they tried to discuss something difficult, they ended up arguing.

Within moments of starting a conversation, he would become angry. She would try to calm him down and pacify him, but nothing seemed to help. Eventually, she would withdraw into silence, leaving them both frustrated, hurt and no further forward.

On the surface, it looked like a communication problem. Neither was particularly good at active listening, and both needed to learn how to have difficult conversations without escalating into conflict.

But that was only a small part of what was happening.

As I listened and watched how they interacted, I began to see something deeper.

He had grown up with a highly critical parent. As a child, he had learned to respond to criticism in a particular way, and that response had become deeply embedded in him.

His wife's tone could be frustrated, critical and lacking in empathy. When she spoke to him in this way, it triggered something much older than the conversation they were having.

His nervous system was responding not only to his wife in the present, but also to the emotional experiences of his childhood.

What he felt first was anger. But underneath that anger was something he wasn't consciously recognising: hurt and sadness.

In therapy, we sometimes describe this as a defensive emotion. Anger becomes the emotion we experience and express, while the more vulnerable, authentic feeling underneath remains hidden.

He wasn't consciously choosing to become angry. His response had developed long ago as a way of dealing with painful experiences, and it was now being activated in his marriage.

His wife, meanwhile, couldn't understand why he reacted so strongly to what she was saying. From her perspective, his anger seemed completely disproportionate to the conversation.

She would initially try to calm him, but when that failed, she withdrew into silence.

That was her own established way of responding to conflict.

And so the cycle continued.

Her frustrated, critical tone triggered his old feelings of hurt, which emerged as anger. His anger overwhelmed her, and she withdrew. Her withdrawal left him feeling even more hurt and misunderstood.

Neither could see that they were reacting not just to each other, but to patterns that were already operating inside them.

I could see this dynamic by our second session.

The work was not simply about teaching them to listen better. It was about helping them understand what was happening emotionally, why it was happening, and how to respond differently.

He began to recognise the hurt beneath his anger and learned to stay connected to those feelings rather than automatically reacting defensively.

She began to understand why her tone had such an impact on him, while also recognising how her own withdrawal contributed to their difficulties.

We changed the way they approached conversations, building empathy, curiosity and understanding into how they spoke and listened to one another.

Her frustrated, critical tone gradually gave way to a more caring and inquisitive one. He no longer needed to respond with the same defensive anger.

By the sixth session, they could both see and understand the pattern, and they had changed the way they related to each other.

The problem that had repeatedly turned their conversations into arguments disappeared.

What had looked like a straightforward inability to communicate was actually a much deeper emotional process.

Once that process became visible, they could change it.

That is the difference between working on the surface of a problem and working at depth.

Example 4: When a Couple Have Grown Apart — and One Has Fallen Out of Love

One of the more complex couples I worked with came to see me to find out whether they had a future together.

In their words, they had grown apart.

He was still in love with his wife, still found her attractive and still wanted the relationship. For him, his feelings hadn't changed.

For her, things were very different. She cared about him, but he was firmly in what she described as the 'friend zone'. The romantic and emotional connection had gone.

She came to therapy with very little hope that things could change. He had somewhat more.

To understand what was happening, we needed to look at how their relationship had developed.

They had met when she was 23. At that time, she wanted stability, which he offered. He was also going through a period of experimenting with being more outgoing and sociable, and she had fallen in love with the man she knew then.

Over the years, they had completed two major projects together, had two children and built a busy life. She had a demanding job, and there was increasingly little time or energy left for each other.

Their differences had also become more pronounced. She preferred to spend time socialising with friends, while he was perfectly happy being at home.

On the surface, they were doing many of the things couples are encouraged to do when they feel disconnected. They were talking, going for walks, spending time together and trying to slow their lives down enough to make space for the relationship.

But none of this was restoring the connection.

Because the real difficulty wasn't simply that they had stopped spending enough time together. Something much deeper had happened.

As I got to know them, I began to see that over the years, both had gradually returned to older, more familiar ways of being.

He had settled back into his naturally quieter personality.

She had settled back into an attachment pattern that placed enormous value on independence and self-sufficiency.

She was proud of being self-sufficient and saw it as a positive part of who she was. What she hadn't recognised was that this independence was also connected to experiences from her early life.

Those experiences had shaped how she managed closeness, vulnerability and emotional dependence on another person.

She struggled to connect with some of her own emotions and to recognise and respond empathically to his. She also tended to establish firm, non-negotiable positions around her own needs, while his needs received relatively little attention.

But she didn't recognise this picture of herself.

When I first began exploring these possibilities, she pushed back. They didn't resonate with her, and she felt that she was simply being herself.

I understood why she saw it that way. These patterns were familiar to her and had been part of how she functioned for much of her life.

So rather than repeatedly challenging her understanding of herself, I took a different approach.

I wrote articles for them to read between sessions, explaining some of the psychological ideas that might be relevant to their relationship. I encouraged her to explore the ideas independently, including researching them herself, rather than simply accepting my interpretation.

I wanted her to be able to consider these possibilities in her own time.

Meanwhile, something else was becoming apparent in the sessions.

Her needs and expectations were frequently discussed, but he rarely spoke about his own.

I also noticed something happening inside me. I felt apprehensive about raising certain subjects with her, anticipating that they might be met with defensiveness.

That observation was important.

I wondered whether he experienced something similar in the relationship.

Rather than assuming I was right, I shared what I had noticed and invited him to reflect on whether he ever felt the same way.

He did.

This surprised his wife. She hadn't realised that he felt inhibited about expressing himself or bringing certain things to her.

What was happening between them was beginning to become visible, not just through what they told me, but through what was happening in the room.

At this stage, I took a considered risk.

I wrote them a reflective report, setting out my understanding of what might be contributing to their loss of connection.

I knew that some of my observations would place a spotlight on her ways of relating, and that she might find this difficult to hear.

But I could now see something important.

The question was no longer simply whether they should stay together. I was beginning to understand what was preventing them from experiencing the kind of emotional connection that might make staying together something they both wanted.

The challenge was how to help them see this without making her feel criticised, blamed or pushed into a position she couldn't accept.

So I devised some exercises that would allow them to discover aspects of the pattern for themselves.

Rather than telling her what I thought was happening, I created opportunities for her to notice and experience it directly.

And that made the difference.

She came back surprised by what she had discovered.

Something that had previously felt like an inaccurate description of her now began to make sense through her own experience.

From there, we were able to work much more deeply on how they connected.

We explored what healthy emotional attachment could look like for each of them, how to make room for both people's needs, and how to develop greater empathy, emotional openness and responsiveness.

For the first time, they began learning how to connect emotionally in ways that had not previously been available to them.

They also came to understand that no one person can meet all of another person's needs. A healthy relationship doesn't require two people to become everything to each other, but it does require them to recognise, care about and respond to one another's important emotional needs.

With this understanding, they were able to work through frustrations that had previously kept them apart and discover ways of connecting that both found meaningful and valuable.

The work was not about persuading her to fall back in love or persuading him to become the more outgoing man he had been when they met.

It was about understanding what had happened to their emotional connection, what was preventing it from developing, and whether something different could become possible.

That required us to look beyond the obvious explanations: busy lives, different interests, too little time together and the feeling that they had simply grown apart.

Those things were real, but they didn't explain the whole picture.

Only when we understood the deeper patterns beneath their loss of connection could they begin to change what was happening between them.

And that is what working at depth means.

Sometimes the task isn't to repair an argument or stop a destructive cycle. It is to uncover the emotional barriers that have made genuine closeness difficult, sometimes for much of a

relationship, and to help two people discover a way of connecting that they have never really experienced before.

Example 5: When Understanding the Pattern Matters More Than Understanding Its Origins

A couple in their mid-sixties came to see me. They cared deeply for one another, but their relationship had become increasingly difficult.

They argued frequently. He felt he was constantly walking on eggshells, while she described herself as often feeling irritated by him. They both believed they needed to improve their communication. And while that was true, it was only part of the picture.

As I took their histories, several important things emerged. His sense of worth depended heavily on what other people thought of him. This influenced his own choices and sometimes his wife's as well, including what she wore and how she behaved. He also believed he could see underlying emotional difficulties in his wife that she either couldn't or wouldn't acknowledge. He wanted her to recognise these things and wanted to stop feeling as though he was living on eggshells.

Her difficulties were less immediately clear. She had spent much of her life disconnected from certain aspects of her emotional experience. She wasn't particularly inclined towards self-reflection and didn't share his interest in exploring psychological explanations. She described occasions when he became angry or insisted on having things his way. He described how deeply hurt he felt when he believed he had done something wrong, including when he thought he was responsible for her unhappiness.

He reflected deeply, but often through the lens of his own fears and interpretations. She reflected much less and struggled to recognise some of what might be happening inside her. Both had more than sixty years of established ways of relating behind them.

As I watched their conversations in sessions, a pattern emerged. Without realising it, he would form an opinion about what his wife was thinking or feeling, then respond to that interpretation as though it were a fact. Even when he believed he was being supportive, she could experience him as trying to lead her towards what he thought was true. She would say there was nothing deeper going on, but he struggled to accept her answer.

Underneath his need to understand and get things right, I could see a much younger part of him that wanted to please, feel accepted and know he was okay in the eyes of someone important. When she was unhappy, he felt he had failed. He pushed for connection and reassurance, often without recognising what he was seeking.

But my attempts to explore possible connections between his wife's present responses and earlier experiences didn't resonate with her. She had never really thought about herself this way and disagreed with my interpretation. That was okay. Working at depth doesn't mean insisting someone accepts a psychological explanation of themselves. It means understanding what is happening well enough to find a way forward that is possible for them.

So I changed my approach. Rather than continuing to explore the origins of her patterns, I stepped back and worked with basic listening skills. I thought this might either create meaningful change or reveal more about their interactions. It did both.

Slowing their conversations down revealed two things. First, he often responded from his own assumptions rather than becoming curious about what she was actually experiencing. Second, she tended to pull back, go quiet and appear to agree very quickly. Some of this reflected medical difficulties and tiredness. Another pattern was also visible: she had learned to be a 'good girl', accommodate others and not fully express her own voice. Even seeing this happen, she didn't agree that it was connected to her past. I didn't need to persuade her.

Instead, I asked them to map out their conversations moment by moment: what one said, what the other heard, what each assumed and felt, and how each responded. They could see the precise points where their conversations began to go wrong. Rather than arguing about who was to blame, they could see their own contributions and take responsibility for changing them.

I introduced the concept of immediacy: recognising and responding to what is happening emotionally between two people in the moment, rather than focusing exclusively on the subject being discussed. If someone feels criticised, anxious, hurt or misunderstood, that experience becomes important information. They can address it before returning to the original topic. The emotional connection takes precedence over the subject of the conversation.

This was transformative. He learned to check whether his wife's mood was actually connected to something he had done rather than assuming he was responsible, and to trust her answer. She felt less scrutinised and less pressured to explain herself in ways that didn't feel true.

I also noticed that some of his questions, apparently aimed at understanding or helping her, were actually attempts to obtain reassurance. He hadn't recognised this. Once it was highlighted, he could ask genuinely open questions rather than becoming defensive or insisting on his interpretation. She learned to respond in ways that reassured him without being made responsible for all his feelings.

As they became more skilled at immediacy, their difficulties reduced dramatically. They estimated that around 90% of their problems with emotional connection had been resolved. This progress did not depend on his wife accepting my ideas about where her patterns came from. Through observing their interactions and responding differently, both discovered more about themselves. As new insights emerged, I could help them connect those discoveries to something meaningful.

By the later stages of our work, they were refining and consolidating these changes, including more advanced communication skills, and were approaching the end of therapy.

This illustrates something fundamental about working at depth. It isn't always necessary for both people to explore their past in detail or agree with the therapist's interpretation. What matters is recognising the deeper processes at work and finding an approach that enables change. Sometimes that means exploring childhood directly; sometimes it means helping people discover their patterns through what happens in the present.

They didn't need to become different people. They needed to stop responding to each other through patterns they hadn't known were there. And that made all the difference.