

ST-C Module 13: The „Highway to Hell“ – preparing a separation (by Eckhard Roediger)

The ST-C Modules 1 to 12 describe the good outcome of a couple's therapy. You could call this the "Stairway to Heaven". However, in many cases this is not a reachable goal. Getting to some kind of "living together apart" arrangement where the couples share conjoint fields of interest but live separate lives where they do not match is a reasonable and more frequently realistic result of our work. Nevertheless, more than quite a few couples discover that they actually do not really match with each other and one of the partners decides to quit the relationship. Unfortunately, it takes two partners to start a relationship but only one to end it. This are the steps to take in a separation process:

1. Try to collect a feedback from both partners about their summary of your work with them up to this point.
2. Use chair dialogues to clarify the pros and cons of separating (or staying together). Offer one chair for each tendency and ask the clients to sit on both chairs with eyes close. Let them picture their life on both chairs half a year after a separation and ask how they feel. Therapist: *"Now you are sitting on the pro-chair. How do you feel half a year after you separated? What's been working better? How is your life easier or more pleasant?"* Then let the client move to the contra-chair. *"How do you feel now on the "contra chair" half a year later? What do you miss about your partner and your relationship? What is more difficult now?"* At the end ask the client: *"How many percent are on the separation side of the balance and how many percent on the continuing side?"* Do this exercise with both partners.
3. If there is still enough "good-will" on both sides to give it another try make an agreement on what exactly the couple wants to work on for a defined period of time (e.g. one, two or maximum three months). Define the exact behaviour they need to show. After this time re-evaluate the process.
4. If the result is not satisfying propose an experimental separation for a defined time (e.g. one, two or maximum three months). This works best if the couple can live in different places. Decide how you want to continue to work together during this time.
5. Re-evaluate the process. If one of the partners wants to quit, state the mismatch of interests and make clear, that it is probably better to separate than to continue fighting.
6. Try to find fair solutions for the remaining issues. Refer the couple to a mediator to fix legal issues. Clarify if one partner wants to continue individual sessions and the other partner accepts that.
7. If possible, end the couple's meetings with a positive feedback on what both partners are thankful for after all the years together despite the differences and conflicts they have now.

Preparing a Separation in Schema Therapy for Couples (ST-C)

