

# First Person

A marital therapist shares the pain of troubled couples

## 'I wish I could work magic, and my clients do, too'

In the 1980s divorce and unhappy marriages seem to have become a fact of American life. What statistics and trends can't show is the hurt so often felt by the individuals involved. Marital therapist Jean Barnett Goldsmith works with many of these individuals. "Most people who come to me are in pain, and my job is to empathize with that pain," she says.

Goldsmith, 42, a clinical psychologist, has had a private practice in marital, family and individual therapy for 11 years. "I find I can't do more than six hours of therapy a day without burning out," she told writer Marya Smith. She sees patients both in her Rogers Park home office and in her North Michigan Avenue office at the Center for Family Studies. Goldsmith works with married couples but explains that her practice also takes in post-divorce couples, single parents and entire families. Her own family includes her husband, Martin, a city planner for the city of Chicago, their 6-year-old son, Jacob, and her grown stepchildren, Elizabeth and Andrew.

Goldsmith is a member of the faculty at Northwestern Memorial Hospital and Northwestern University Medical School.

I'm trained to help people work on problems. I see couples who have been married one year and couples who have been married 30 years. It's almost impossible to tell who will stay together and who will split up. It's clear that some people have a workable marriage, but with many, that's not clear at all. And sometimes the couple with many problems are stubborn and they stay together. Others with few problems do get divorced, perhaps because they have greater expectations or fantasies about how their life could be. I wish I could work magic, and my clients do, too. But therapy is hard. Change must come from within the individuals. I'm the facilitator.

Therapy can vary from six weeks to six years. Sometimes couples come in with a very specific problem, perhaps whether or not to adopt a child, and we can reach a resolution in a few sessions. With others, the problems in their marriage are deep-rooted and can take years to resolve. I'm almost always let people start sessions themselves, and I listen carefully to the material they are coming in with. Sometimes the problem presented isn't the only one or is covering up another. For example, a couple might come in saying they are arguing about parenting, and what emerges is that they haven't had sex in a year, so we shift the focus of the therapy. In some marriages, clearing up the emotional issues clears up



Marital therapist Jean Barnett Goldsmith in her Rogers Park office.

the sexual area. It's a rare case where we don't talk about sex, but formal sexual therapy is not done in the majority of cases.

I have to work with many people who don't recognize they have a problem. In individual therapy, the person usually says, "I need help," but in marital therapy, one says, "I need help," and the other says, "I'm fine." It's not unusual for both husband and wife to blame each other. They come in, in distress, and often believe the problem is in the other person. They say to their spouses, "You change." Part of my challenge is to help stop the finger-pointing and to help people identify their own roles.

I believe that problems in relationships are mutually causal. There's not a villain and a heroine. Two people come into a marriage with good intentions and personal problems, and vicious cycles develop.

Throughout therapy, trust is important—building trust between the two people and developing their trust with me. It takes time, but they have to get to a point where they can be vulnerable with each other. They've been hurt and they're self-protective. The task of the therapist is to help a person take that risk with a partner and to help the partner be available. Timing is very important. I have to assess when a person is ready to be receptive so the other doesn't open up and get hurt again. It's not necessarily harder the longer a couple has been married. What matters is how long they've been hurting each other, and that can start at any point. The most wonderful thing is when two people who haven't expressed their love for each other take that risk because of their work in the therapy. I've had sessions when people have gotten up and hugged each other be-

cause loving feelings that were blocked have been freed up.

I counsel my clients as couples, and I often do individual therapy with both people sitting there. It can have a positive effect on a person when his or her spouse is present when we're doing this; it can foster intimacy. Many problems in a marriage can be traced back to individual issues. For example, a spouse who has trouble communicating feelings may look back to early childhood. Perhaps he was teased as a boy, called a sissy when he cried. Or perhaps she was told not to make mountains out of molehills when she cried. This kind of early experience can block change for a marriage.

It's a real challenge to be empathetic and positive about two people at the same time when they are hating each other. When I'm working with one, listening and understanding his feelings, say about an argument, his wife is thinking, "She understands him, not me." Then I switch in the same session and empathize with her, and the husband feels I don't understand him. I'm very direct in my work, so from the first I acknowledge to the couple that though I may seem to be siding with one or the other, I do understand both points of view.

You don't have to be divorced to be a good marital therapist. Nor is a perfect marriage a prerequisite. I've known very good therapists whose own marriages were on the rocks. Every marital therapist does have to take a position internally on divorce, to know what he or she believes about divorce. You try to be careful, but your own values are always present in your work. I've spent a lot of time assessing my own feelings. I believe divorce is a major life crisis that can be

an opportunity for change and growth and development but is not necessarily so. For some, the result is negative, but for some, it is an opportunity to do something different. I'm not pro-divorce or pro-marriage. I'm there to help patients make the best decisions for themselves, either to make the best marriage possible or to develop a new life for themselves. Some people stay together who are unhappy, if not miserable, and that is sad to see as a therapist. But I don't believe I can or should make a judgment about who should stay together.

I think one misconception people have about marital therapy is that the only time to come in is when things are terrible, when in fact, the earlier a couple comes in, the easier it is to make changes. Another misconception is that coming in is a sign of weakness. Seeking help is a sign of strength.

It's important to differentiate therapy from friendship. Even though there are many people I see as a therapist that I would love to be friends with, I choose not to. This can be very frustrating for patients and for myself. I grapple with this constantly. Yet I see myself as making a permanent commitment to people as their therapist. If I became their friend, I wouldn't be available to them later.

A minor frustration in the therapy process is that nobody gets everything they want. I feel good about the therapy when people do get what they want, but the client does have to accept what can't be changed. Perhaps a couple has worked on communication, and they talk more, make love more, but he still throws his clothes on the floor and she still has dinner ready 10 minutes late. At some point, people have to accept or minimize each other's idiosyncrasies. No marital partner is going to be perfect.

As much as I accept divorce, I'm in this to help people love each other more and be able to get more of what they want out of their relationships. But I'm cautious not to impose my own values. It's very important as a therapist to work on the goals people have for themselves. This isn't very difficult anymore because over the years I've seen many variations on what successful marriages look like. Something that might not be right for me can be perfectly appropriate for someone else. I realize now that there is an enormous number of ways to work things out.

This is very demanding work. The gratification has to be other than monetary. For me, it's a natural calling. From the time I was a child I have been fascinated by relationships and concerned about people's feelings. I have had to learn how to be empathetic with people very different from myself. Learning to understand and to help has taught me a greater acceptance of myself and of others. I feel I've gained insight into others' lives. I know what it's like to be single, to have 10 children, to be a Quaker, to be a Catholic. I don't just read about it. I experience it with my clients.