Kate Martin: Individual and Couples Therapist and Workshop Leader

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Kate Martin: Individual and Couples Therapist and Workshop Leader

Abstract
Whether she is working as therapist with a couple in crisis in her office or leading a workshop in a church fellowship hall, Kate sees this as her way, as she says, of "answering God's call to bring redemption."

Keywords
social service, social workers, therapist and patient, faith, self-care

Disciplines
Social Work

Comments
Chapter from published book: http://dordt.on.worldcat.org/oclc/918989894

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It was ten o'clock on a crisp, sunny autumn morning. The air was cool enough for a light jacket, but winter was still a few weeks away. Kate Martin enjoyed her bike ride from the college where she was teaching a class back to her home, which is about two miles from campus. During her ride, she reflected on her morning class; the senior social work students were sharing their experiences with clients in their various field placements. Kate had felt herself catching the energy of this new group of social workers as well as their passion for working with people facing life challenges. They reminded her of why she chose social work as her profession.

The bike ride gave Kate not only the time to think about her morning, but also to prepare herself for the individuals and couples she would see in her private therapy practice the rest of her workday. Arriving at home, she grabbed her lunch and hopped in her family's car to drive to her office. She had glanced at her planner earlier this morning; she would be seeing clients all afternoon and into the evening.

The Path to Becoming a Therapist

Kate's parents were both social workers. They lived and taught that God expects Christians to care for others and be agents of change in their communities. Her parents had taken different paths in social work—her dad worked with people with developmental disabilities and her mother had been a clinical social worker. The variety of career options in social work appealed to Kate, along with the direct connection she saw between social work and her call as a Christian. Kate's high school friends told her she was a good listener and someone whom they trusted with their problems or concerns. Her decision to pursue social work in college seemed like an obvious one.

After graduation with her BSW, Kate worked for a year in a neighborhood organization because of her interest in community organizing. She quickly realized that while she felt drawn to community organizing, this kind of social
work often requires years of rapport and network building. Kate entered graduate school with an interest in pursuing clinical social work instead, deciding she would engage in community work as a volunteer rather than professionally. Her master’s level internship in a local hospital led to her employment there after graduating with her MSW, and she stayed on for five years. She decided to open her own clinical practice, and four years ago, she joined ten other therapists in the building where she currently has an office.

Kate feels confident she made the right decision. She says,

When a couple starts to experience healing and health in their relationship, I go home flying high knowing I’m right where I’m supposed to be.

A Long Day in the Office

After teaching her class, biking home, eating lunch, and driving to the office, Kate greeted her colleagues, grabbed a cup of coffee, and sat down at her desk to review her client files—an important part of her routine that gives her time to think about her upcoming clients. Her first appointment of the day was a young couple she has seen weekly for the past three weeks.

The couple, Becky and Matt, had been married four years; they had been trying unsuccessfully to have a baby for the past two of those years. They had sought medical help and now were going through treatment for infertility. The medical interventions in their sexual relationship designed to address their infertility, along with the disappointment and frustration they felt as the months went by with no pregnancy, had begun to erode their relationship. Because of conflict and distance between them, Becky had become depressed. Kate was helping them to communicate their feelings to one another in ways they could each feel supported rather than turning their frustration onto one another. The next step for Kate would be addressing Becky’s depression. Over the weeks, Kate had seen improvement in their communication and support for one another.

Still, the basic challenge of wanting a baby, of the cycles of hope followed by deep disappointment, continued. Becky is a Christian and she questioned why God, whom she believes has all control and power, had not allowed her to have children. In her own mind and heart, Kate asked the same question, wondering about the meaning of God’s plan for our lives. As a parent herself, she prayed that Becky would also be able to have that experience. At the same time, she has learned that prayer does not always bring the answer we want; her job is to walk with Becky and Matt through the uncertainty, the questions that seem to have no good answers, and the decisions they are now contemplating. Should they try to adopt? Keep trying for a pregnancy? Or find their way forward into life without their own children?
After her hour with Becky and Matt, Kate's next appointment was with Brian and Sheila. Six months ago, Brian had told Sheila that he had been having an affair for the past year, and they made an appointment with Kate a week later. Kate has been working with them ever since. Sheila had been unable to forgive Brian and the couple was now seriously contemplating divorce. It helped that Brian had finally agreed to end his other relationship, but it had taken him some time, further eroding their relationship. Sheila still could not allow herself to trust him.

After the session with Brian and Sheila, Kate paused to jot notes about the two sessions she had completed. She keeps progress notes on each session to help her remember what she and her clients have accomplished. Writing things down about the session also helps her process the events that occurred and she is able to begin thinking about where she might direct their next session. Although paperwork is one of her least favorite parts of the job, it is essential. Kate finished the last of her coffee and headed to the reception area to get her third client of the day.

Maryann was waiting for her; this session would be the first time Maryann's husband, Phil, would not be coming. After six months of counseling with Kate, Phil and Maryann had recently filed for divorce. They had been married for ten years, but they had drifted apart over the past four years. Phil had decided three weeks previously that he did not want to try working on their marriage anymore and Maryann had agreed to sign the divorce papers once he filed them. Kate hoped to help Maryann begin to envision her life after Phil as a woman who was divorced. Kate says:

I find hope in my work with couples and individuals when they are able to mend hurts and repair brokenness. Couples do not always mend their relationships; but even in the ending of relationships, there can be hope. People can come to a fuller understanding of who they are in relationships while also gaining some individual integrity.

Kate saw two individual clients later in the afternoon—one struggling with postpartum depression and another with significant anxiety due to a stressful job. Between sessions, she took a quick leave from the office to pick up her children from school and take them home, giving her time to check in with them about their day. It was her husband's day to cook dinner because it was her night to do evening hours at her practice. She had extended her practice into the evening hours to fit her clients' work schedules.

After supper, Kate saw two more clients. Kate has scheduled clients three long days like this each week. She uses Tuesday and Thursday to work at home on paperwork, school work, and family responsibilities.
A Focus on Couples

Although Kate sees individuals in her practice, her specialty is couples work. Kate has worked with a variety of couples, regardless of their marital status or sexual orientation. Kate’s perspective is that her beliefs and values do not have to agree with her clients for her to be able to provide them with professional care. She says:

People do not have to be Christians to grow a stronger couple relationship. For that reason, I do not call my practice ‘Christian counseling.’ If my clients ask me, I will share that I am a Christian, but I will tell them that I work within their framework. I am not out to change their worldview; my goal is to strengthen their relationship.

As a consequence, Kate has worked with married couples, divorcing couples, cohabiting (unmarried) couples, couples in marriages open to sexual liaisons with others outside the marriage, heterosexual couples, and gay and lesbian couples. About her openness to working with couples in a diversity of lifestyles, she says:

There are certain lifestyles that what we know from the research on attachment do not work very well for building trust and a secure attachment between partners. I will share that research if appropriate; usually that would be a conversation with couples who have a marriage open to other sexual liaisons. I do not address right and wrong but rather, how openness to other sexual relationships undermines the secure couple attachment.

Kate has worked with marital couples separated from one another and trying to reconcile as well as couples where infidelity has occurred and they are trying to figure out what to do next. Couples also come to see her about relationship struggles—fighting, sexual problems, and emotional intimacy issues. Kate also provides premarital counseling for engaged couples, often at the request of a pastor whom they have asked to perform their wedding.

Kate provides contractual services for congregations in the area; the congregation pays for the counseling of members their leaders refer to Kate. Sometimes pastors ask Kate her position on issues like sexual orientation or divorce. Kate explains:

Pastors want to know how I respond to those issues in my practice, and some of them do not like what I tell them, but a pastor’s role is different from a therapeutic role. I have to speak clearly to them about my role in working with couples with diverse orientations and worldviews.
Kate has also found a significant amount of satisfaction in her work around community education, partnering with churches and other community organizations that are interested in "promoting relationship help and marital health." She gives couples the tools they need to develop and maintain healthy relationships. She also is able to screen for when they may need more help than she can provide in an educational group. She loves being back in community work, which was her first interest as a college student. Community marriage education has fulfilled that earlier interest in practice at the community level.

Not all of her work leaves her "flying high." Kate is a social worker at heart, but private practice has also required her to learn and use good business practices. She is responsible for calling insurance companies and writing reports needed by courts, physicians, and other professionals involved in the lives of her clients. In order to balance what she enjoys in her work with what drains her, Kate has attempted to maximize what is "life-giving" for her—like the marriage education courses in the community—and she tries to put boundaries around what drains her—the business side of her practice.

**Faith and Social Work**

The interaction between Kate's Christian faith and her career as a social worker in private practice has always seemed clear to her. She says:

Social workers enter people's brokenness and, in relationship with our clients, we can work toward healing and repair. I see that as a clear way of living out God's call to be agents of change and redemption. It is not that I bring my clients redemption, but I help them find own their way into greater health and love. In that sense, I believe I am helping equip people to have more security and support in the relationships that they have, which creates more functional people, self-aware people. I do see that as a way of nurturing discipleship. When people are healthy in their families and in their marriages, they are more equipped to serve and to come alongside others.

Kate said she can be that agent of redemption with clients whether they are Christians or not. Doing God's work in her relationship with clients does not necessarily mean praying with them or even talking about her beliefs or theirs. Kate wants to emulate Jesus in her relationships with clients and in doing so tries to be available, engaged, caring, empathetic, helpful, and present, as well as gentle or direct depending on what the situation demands. While some of her clients are people of other faiths, that aspect of their lives is important for Kate to know, but not usually the focus of the work Kate is doing with them.

Kate experiences her work with couples—and individuals as well—as a priv-
ilege. Kate says that she only considers praying with a client if the client asks her to do so. She says what is even deeper than verbalized prayer is the “sacred space” of her work with clients. Clients have told her that their time with her feels like a sanctuary for them because they finally have permission to express what is really going on in their hearts and minds. They experience healing.

They experience something here with me and with each other that I believe is set apart and sacred because of how I frame our work and who I am. The reality is that I think that they could learn some of that elsewhere too, with a therapist of a different faith tradition. Still, it is how I view my purpose in the work.

Beliefs involve not only religion and faith, but, for many people, take expression in their politics as well. Kate described a woman who had called a few weeks before our last conversation, interested in setting up an appointment for therapy. First, however, she wanted to know Kate’s political orientation; she asked, “Are you a conservative or a liberal?” The woman would not make an appointment until she knew the answer. Kate chose not to answer that question over the phone, but stated that she would be willing to talk more with the woman in a face-to-face conversation. The woman ultimately decided not to schedule an appointment and moved on to pursuing a different therapist who would answer her question.

Through this experience, Kate realized that it would have been easy, out of anxiety or out of a desire to want to help this woman, to answer the question and fulfill this potential client’s perceived need to know about her political beliefs. If the same situation had occurred a few years before, Kate believes she may have felt the need to persuade the woman to schedule an appointment or may have wanted to prove to the woman that she was “okay.” Kate came to recognize, however, that she is not called to offer services at all costs; “we can’t be all things to all people.” Kate thinks it is tempting as a Christian therapist to feel that God will give you the strength to work with any and every client.

**Self-Care and “Super-Therapy”**

On Wednesdays, Kate has supervision with Sarah, one of her colleagues. Kate recognizes that teaching, providing therapy, raising three young children, and nurturing her own marriage is a heavy load. She has known colleagues who became bitter and exhausted with the work, so she is intentional about taking care of herself to avoid burnout. She has found supervision on a weekly basis very helpful.

Kate has paid Sarah not only to provide clinical supervision, but also personal therapy. They named this hour in her week “super-therapy” and together they work through reviewing Kate’s cases as well as her “own stuff,” so that per-
sonal issues do not interfere when she is working with a client. In previous places of employment, Kate did not receive consistent supervision and she found herself very fatigued and emotionally drained by her work. “Super-therapy” leaves Kate with renewed energy to work and her life beyond work.

Kate has also found that networking with other people in the helping professions has helped her to take care of herself. She regularly meets for lunch or coffee with two other women who are in the helping professions and together they talk about and help each other understand “what it means to be me in this profession.” Running and biking provide Kate with her own personal space to get away from the stresses of work and therapeutic relationships. She also recognizes the importance of play in her life and is intentional in spending time in play while she is home with her children and husband.

Moving Forward

At the beginning of her career, Kate had hoped eventually to be in private practice doing psychotherapy and she has achieved that goal. Now she finds her work expanding back into the community practice to which she was originally drawn. She particularly enjoys working with congregations to provide needed community education around relationship and marital health. She is concerned that pastors and other church staff members are overwhelmed with the needs of marriages and families in their congregations.

In the two years after the first interview, Kate had decided to say no to the university part-time teaching so that she could focus on developing the partnerships with churches and with community organizations to do more community education. She has added educational programs on parenting to her repertoire of programs on couples’ education and is doing more workshops in congregations and in community organizations. She provides one-hour presentations as well as four-hour workshops and weekend retreats—and she loves the work. She has developed a network of congregations where she serves as a consultant as well as providing regular family education programs.

Over the past three years, she completed a certification by a research institute and uses their materials, based in extensive social scientific research, as the foundation for much of her work. Just the Saturday before our last conversation, she had provided a four-hour workshop, “Growing a Vibrant Marriage,” for a group of ten couples in one of the congregations with whom she consults. She is now considering developing a “Part Two” workshop for the many couples who have participated in the first workshop, perhaps addressing more deeply a topic like conflict management. Although the research is not based on Christian beliefs and values, when she is providing workshops in congregations, Kate leads discussion of how the content aligns with “what we as Christians know to be true and healthy about relationships.”
Kate has found this work nourishes her. She says about her work as a therapist:

It can be lonely work, lively but lonely, because I am developing these relationships with people that I do not acknowledge outside the counseling room. It is heavy relational work. Teaching draws on different skills and is energizing in a different kind of way, so that balance is so important to me.

Whether she is working as therapist with a couple in crisis in her office or leading a workshop in a church fellowship hall, Kate sees this as her way, as she says, of “answering God’s call to bring redemption.”

Questions to Ponder

1. Kate’s days are long, yet it is a schedule she chose that includes bike rides to work, long days three days a week and two days to work at home—and an afternoon break to take her children home from school. What about the way she has structured her work does and does not appeal to you?

2. Kate calls herself a “therapist” rather than a “clinical social worker.” What are the pros and cons of the choice she has made?

3. Kate sees herself living her Christian faith, providing “sacred space” for working through the challenges her clients face, serving as “an agent of God’s redemption.” What difference does it make whether that work takes place in her private practice office or in a congregation’s fellowship hall during a marriage education course—or does it?

4. Kate talks about “flying high” on days when she sees change happening in her clients and their relationships. It is on these days that she knows she’s “right where she needs to be.” What experiences have you had in your life where you’ve seen this? How do you know when you’re where you need to be?

5. Kate describes the woman who decided not to make an appointment since Kate would not give her political orientation over the phone. How would you have handled this situation?

6. Kate sees her current work partnering with churches and community organizations to provide marriage and relationship education as a continuation of her community organizing work. How does it fit what you know about community organizing—or not?

7. Kate is intentional about the things she does to take care of herself such as her “super-therapy,” running, and making time with friends and family. How do you take care of yourself