

STANDING IN THE GAP FOR HEALTHY FAMILIES

Becky R. Davenport
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Becky R. Davenport, Ph.D., L.M.F.T.-S. Certified Discernment Counselor, founded the Institute for Couple and Family Enhancement in 2010 after 10 years of clinical practice, teaching, and providing supervision to student clinicians. She recognized a need in the San Antonio area for specialized therapy services for couples and families. She earned her Master's of Arts degree in Marriage and Family Therapy from St. Mary's University in 2000, and her Ph.D. in Human Development and Family studies with specialization in Marriage and Family Therapy from Iowa State University in 2004.



Written by, Amy Morgan

Dr. Becky Davenport has practiced marriage and family therapy for the past 19 years. She established the Institute for Couple and Family Enhancement in 2010, which now includes 16 independent practitioners who provide mental health services. The center just moved to a new location in Far North Central San Antonio, in offices behind the HEB Plus at the corner of US Highway 281 and Evans Road.

Becky advocates for healthy marriages and families, which has led her to become certified in Discernment Counseling and Play Therapy.

Discernment Counseling follows a very specific, structured process developed from Dr. Bill Doherty's research at the University of Minnesota's Marriage and Family Therapy Program following "Couples on the Brink." The goal is to help couples make a clear and confident decision about whether to pursue reconciliation or continue down the path of divorce. Discernment Counseling is designed to be a short-term process, which typically includes fewer than five sessions to help clients make a decision regarding the future of their relationship.

"Discernment Counseling is also not technically intended to change anything about the relationship, only help the partners understand the relationship with

sufficient clarity and confidence that they can make a decision about its future," Becky writes on the ICFE website.

"The Discernment process assumes there is a sense of urgency for the partners to determine where they are going with their relationship... It does not require a time commitment beyond each individually scheduled session, nor does it require any significant vulnerability toward the other spouse. ... A significant benefit of Discernment Counseling is its ability to defuse these emotional build-ups and allow couples to begin down either the path of intense couple therapy or divorce prepared to bring their 'best selves' into either process," Becky continues.

She explains to couples, "We are looking at a map and deciding where it is going to take you. Each path leads to a very different destination, and I want to make sure you know what they will look like." She cautions clients that the divorce path will not prevent all suffering, especially if a couple has children, as the spouses will continue to be in relationship with each other concerning their dependents.

Another important distinction between couples therapy and discernment counseling is how information from both parties is handled by the therapist," she continues. Discernment Counseling therapists keep all conversations

confidential, allowing both spouses to speak openly about all factors including infidelity or feelings about the other that influence their decision about the relationship.

She says couples in Discernment Counseling often report that if they had pursued couples therapy in the past, it had not been able to help them reach a point of making a decision. The discernment process pauses the process long enough to allow each spouse to have better clarity about how the relationship arrived at its point and give space for both parties to step out of the cycle of hurt, defense and blame to look at all options.

Discernment Counseling has proven a bridge for more than half the couples Becky has seen to give them a new and more hopeful way to see their relationship so they can begin to rebuild. As they envision what working on their marriage might look like, they may choose to transition to work toward reconciliation, Becky uses an Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) model that is experiential and attachment based to help them understand their relationship dynamics and how to maintain a bond over time. She recommends the book, *Created for Connection*, to clients to help them recognize their story and redirect their thought patterns and behavior.

MENTAL HEALTH SPECIALIST IN COLLABORATIVE DIVORCE



Becky describes EFT as a method therapists use to help clients learn how to recognize their bodies' physical cues when they are faced with emotions of fear, hurt or anger in their relationship with their spouse. Similar to learning to ride a bike, one doesn't learn best by reading a book or seeing a picture. It takes actually climbing on a bike, with appropriate precautions like training wheels, to be able to ride.

EFT treats relational learning similarly, Becky helps couples identify the fundamental conflict. The therapy session is the "training wheels" in the bike analogy, and the therapist is there to apply the breaks to get the couple to learn how to stay present and be aware of their emotions- not just respond negatively.

"Couples do different dances," she says. "Once they learn their cycle and recognize the negative stories coming up in their head, they can change their behavior." EFT is useful even for couples who go down the divorce path she says, because it helps them have a more systematic understanding of the pattern they got trapped in and how they got there. It highlights places for each to grow in their own healing and forgiveness.

One area where Becky has used her counseling expertise is as a Mental Health Neutral in Collaborative Divorce cases.

While her involvement may seem contrary to her commitment to building marriages and family, she sees the Collaborative Divorce process as an avenue to help minimize the emotional damage of divorce for all parties.

She explains that the Mental Health Neutral facilitates conversations and meetings for clients without involving their attorneys. She is not on either side as she meets individually or together with clients working out their parenting plan, often incorporating input from a child specialist who interviews the couple's children. A child specialist is helpful to the team to bring the kids' voice into the process and humanize them, Becky says, and allows her

to maintain neutrality. The child specialist also helps parents not get stuck on their preconceived ideas about what they think is right for the kids, which may be selfishly motivated.

The Mental Health Neutral provides a safe place to mediate between both spouses and keeps them on track working out the negotiations, she adds. In the best case, Collaborative Divorce works as a team process that has potential to move people toward health and healing. Ideally, it also protects the kids from the emotional damage of a drawn-out, acrimonious litigation.

"Litigation can be toxic and scary," she says. "In the collaborative process when it's a good team doing it right, the air there is safe."



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