

How To Get The Most From Couples Therapy

This document is designed to help you get the most benefit from our work together. The first three sections deal with how to prepare for and maximize the value of our sessions. The fourth section summarizes some brief concepts about relationships and productive couples therapy.

Your job is to create your own individual objectives for being in therapy. Like a good coach, my job is to help you reach them. I have many, many tools to help you become a more effective partner - they work best when you are clear about how you aspire to be.

My goal is to help you each make better adjustments and responses to each other without violating your core values or deeply held principles.

Goals and Objectives of Couples Therapy

The major aim of therapy is increasing your knowledge about yourself, your partner and the patterns of interaction between you. Therapy becomes effective as you apply new knowledge to break ineffective patterns and develop better ones.

The key tasks of couples therapy are increasing your clarity about:

- The kind of life you want to build together
- The kind of partner you aspire to be in order to build the kind of life and relationship you want to create
- Your individual blocks to becoming the kind of partner you aspire to be
- The skills and knowledge necessary to do the above tasks

Trade-offs and Tough Choices

To create sustained improvement in your relationship you need:

- A vision of the life you want to build together and individually
- The appropriate attitudes and skills to work as a team
- The motivation to persist
- Time to review progress
- To create the relationship you really desire, there will be some difficult tradeoffs and tough choices for each person.

The first trade-off will be **time**. It simply takes time to create a relationship that flourishes: time to be together, time to be with family, time to play, coordinate, nurture, relax, hang out and plan. This time will encroach on some other valuable areas – your personal or professional time.

The second compromise is **comfort**. That means emotional comfort, like going out on a limb to try novel ways of thinking or doing things, listening and being curious instead of butting in, speaking up instead of becoming resentfully compliant or withdrawing. At the beginning, there will be emotional risk taking action, but you will never explore different worlds if you always keep sight of the shoreline. In addition, few people are emotionally comfortable being confronted with how they don't live their values or being confronted with the consequences of their actions.

The other comfort that will be challenged is your **energy**. It simply takes effort to sustain improvement over time - staying conscious of making a difference over time - remembering to be more respectful, more giving, more appreciative etc. It takes effort to remember and act.

The other effort is even more difficult for some people - that is **improving their reaction** to problems. For example, if one person is hypersensitive to criticism, and his/her partner is hypersensitive to feeling ignored, it will take effort to improve their sensitivity instead of hoping the partner will stop ignoring or criticizing.

In all these areas, there is generally a conflict between short-term gratification and the long-term goal of creating a satisfying relationship. The blunt reality is that, in an interdependent

relationship, effort is required on the part of each person to make a sustained improvement. It is like pairs figure skating – one person cannot do most of the work and still create an exceptional team.

How to Maximize the Value from your Couples Therapy Sessions

A common yet unproductive pattern in couples therapy is making the focus be whatever problem happens to be on someone's mind at the moment. This is a reactive (and mostly ineffective) approach to working things through.

The second unproductive pattern is showing up with each person saying, "I don't know what to talk about, do you?" While this blank slate approach may open some interesting doors, it is a hit or miss process.

The third common unproductive pattern is discussing whatever fight you are in at the moment or whatever fight you had since the last meeting. Discussing these fights/arguments without a larger context of what you wish to learn from the experience is often an exercise in spinning your wheels.

Over time, repeating these patterns will lead to the question, "***Are we getting anywhere?***"

A more powerful approach to your couples therapy sessions is for each person to do the following before each session:

- Reflect on your objectives for being in therapy
- Think about your next step that supports or relates to your larger objectives for the kind of relationship you wish to create, or the kind of partner you aspire to become .

This reflection takes some effort. Yet few people would call an important meeting and then say, "Well, I don't have anything to bring up, does anyone else have anything on their agenda?" Your preparation will reap rewards.

Important Concepts for Couples Therapy and Relationships

The following ideas can help identify areas of focus in our work and/or stimulate discussion between you and your partner between meetings. If you periodically review this list, you will discover that your reflections and associations will change over time. So please revisit this list often, it will help you keep focus during our work.

Attitude is Key

When it comes to improving your relationship, your attitude toward change is more important than what action to take.

- What to do and how to do it can often be easily identified. The real challenge is why you don't do it!
- How to think differently about a problem is often more effective than just trying to figure out what action to take
- Your partner is quite limited in his/her ability to respond to you. You are quite limited in your ability to respond to your partner. Accepting that is a huge step into maturity.
- It is very possible that you have some mistaken assumptions about your partner's motives. And that he/she has some mistaken assumptions about yours. The problem is, most of the time we don't want to believe those assumptions are mistaken .

Focus on Changing Yourself Rather than Your Partner

Problems occur when reality departs sharply from our expectations, hopes, desires and concerns. It's human nature to try and change one's partner instead of adjusting our expectations BUT

- Couples therapy works best if you have more goals for yourself than for your partner. I am at my best when I help you reach objectives you set for yourself.

- The hardest part of couples therapy is accepting you will need to improve your response to a problem (how you think about it, feel about it, or what to do about it). Very few people want to focus on improving their response. It's more common to build a strong case for why the other should do the improving.
- You can't change your partner. Your partner can't change you. You can influence each other, but that doesn't mean you can change each other. Becoming a more effective partner is the most efficient way to change a relationship.
- It's easy to be considerate and loving to your partner when life is good, the sun is shining and breezes are gentle. But when the going gets tough, you're hungry and tired, and your partner is whining and sniveling about how you got them into this mess, that's when you get tested. Your leadership and your character get tested. Either you can join in the blame game or you can try to move closer towards your "ideal" or "better self" in this relationship.
- Nothing is impossible for the person who doesn't have to do it
- Fear is often a signal that you're not prepared. If you think of fear in this way, it becomes a signal for you to prepare as best you can rather than something to run away from.
- You can learn a lot about yourself by understanding what annoys you and how you handle it.
- The more you believe your partner should be different, the less initiative you will take to change the patterns between you

Zen Aspects of Couples Therapy (Some Contradictions)

- All significant growth comes from disagreements, dissatisfaction with the current status, or a striving to make things better. Paradoxically, accepting that conflict produces growth and learning to manage inevitable disagreements is the key to more harmonious relationships
- It's not what you say. It's what they hear
- Solutions, no matter how perfect, often set the stage for new problems.

Tough Questions □

- Asking good questions - of yourself and your partner - helps you uncover the real issues
- In a strong disagreement, do you really believe your partner is entitled to their opinion?
- Under stress, do you have the courage to actively seek out and try to understand your partner's reality? Do you also have the courage to express your reality when the stakes are high?
- Why is it important to let your partner know what you think, feel and are concerned about? Because they really can't appreciate what they don't understand

- What is the price your partner will have to pay to improve their response to you? How much do you care about the price they will have to pay? (ie what might they have to give up on or give in to ?)
- Can you legitimately expect your partner to treat you better than you treat him/her?
- Can you legitimately expect your partner to treat you better than you treat yourself?
- If you want your partner to change, do you think about what you can do to make it easier?

- When a problem shows up, it's natural to think "What should I do about it?"

*A much more productive question is, "**How do I want to be or act in this situation?**"*

The Importance of Communication

The three most important qualities for effective communication are respect, openness and persistence.

- Good communication is much more difficult than most people want to believe. Effective negotiation is even harder.
- A couple's vision emerges from a process of reflection and inquiry. It requires both people to speak from the heart about what really matters to each.
- We are all responsible for how we express ourselves, no matter how others treat us.

Communication is the number one presenting problem in couples counseling.

- Effective communication means you need to pay attention to:
- Managing strong emotions, such as intense anger
- How you are communicating – whining, blaming, being vague, etc.
- What you want from your partner during the discussion
- What the problem means to you – what exactly is at stake/under threat etc?
- The outcome you want from the discussion
- Your partner's major concerns
- How you can help your partner become more responsive to you
- The beliefs and attitudes you have about the problem.

Some Final Thoughts...

- You can't create a flourishing relationship just by fixing what's wrong. But it's a start.
- Love is destroyed when self-interest dominates.
- The possibility exists that we choose partners we need but don't necessarily want.
- To get to the bottom of a problem often means you first accept how complex it is.
- Trust is the foundational building block of a flourishing relationship. You create trust by doing what you say you will do.
 - It's impossible to be in a highly inter-dependent relationship without ever being judgmental or being judged.
 - If you strive to always feel emotionally safe in your relationship and get it, the price is the possibility of dullness & boredom
 - If neither of you ever rocks the boat, you will end up with a safe but possibly dull relationship

Most of the ineffective things we do in relationships fall into just a few categories:

- Blame or attempt to dominate
- Disengage/withdraw
- Resentful compliance
- Whine
- Denial or confusion

These are the normal emotional reactions to feeling a threat or high stress. Improving your relationship means better management of these reactions.

Everything you do works for some part of you, even if other parts of you don't like it.

Everything you do that takes a sustained effort is governed by three motivations:

- To avoid pain or discomfort
- The benefits involved
- To be a better person
- It's also true for your partner.

If you are asking your partner to change something, sometimes it's a good idea to ask if the change is consistent with how they wish to be in that situation.

Businesses and marriages fail for the same three reasons. A failure to:

- Learn from the past
- Adapt to changing conditions
- Predict probable future problems and take action
- Effective change requires insight plus action. Action without insight is blind. Insight without action is ineffective
- If you want to create a win-win solution, you cannot hold a position that has caused your partner to lose in the past. Something/someone has to give .

