

Making Couples Therapy Work

The major aim of therapy is increasing your knowledge about yourself, your partner and the patterns of interaction between you. Therapy works when you apply new knowledge to interrupt ineffective patterns and develop better ones. My goal is to help you develop a shared understanding of what happens in your relationship, and to better respond to each other without violating your core values or deeply held principles.

Key tasks of couples therapy include increasing your clarity about:

- The relationship you want
- The choices and behaviors that are consistent with having the relationship you want
- Where and why it gets hard to make those choices and engage in those behaviors

The hard work of great relationships

Putting in the time. It takes time to create a great relationship: time to be together, time to be with family/community, time for shared fun and relaxation, time to coordinate and plan. It can feel hard to make this time if there are competing pressures on your time (e.g. for children, work, and individual development).

Leaving your comfort zone. This work requires you to be brave: both when you share information about yourself with your partner, and when you listen to what they tell you about themselves. In addition, we will explore what happens when you are each at your worst: no one's favorite topic.

Owning your part. People often enter couple's therapy focusing on a problem they see in their partner. However, each of you will be called upon to examine your assumptions and your coping strategies, and how these impact your interactions with each other. Ultimately, you will each confront the reality that you can effect change only within yourself and through creating an environment that supports the relationship you want.

Getting the most out of our sessions:

As we map out the recurring patterns and cycles of conflict or distance in your relationship, our starting point will sometimes be a specific issue you have identified, or a fight you've gone through. However, we will keep in mind that these are not "the problem" but symptoms of an overall pattern we are trying to understand and rework.

In order to keep our focus on this bigger picture of the relationship, it is helpful for each person to do the following before each session:

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

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

If you find that you don't feel like taking a positive attitude, that is a clue that you have been suppressing thoughts or feelings. In what ways are you staying hidden?

How to think differently about a problem is often more effective than just trying to figure out what action to take. What meaning have you been assigning to the situation? Are alternative interpretations possible?

It is highly likely that you have some flawed assumptions about your partner's motives. And that he/she has some flawed assumptions about yours. The problem is, most of the time we don't want to believe our assumptions are flawed. Often, those assumptions are tied to the ways we have learned to make sense of the world. Challenging that framework is scary.

Focus on Changing Yourself Rather than Your Partner

Couples therapy works best if you have more goals for yourself than for your partner. Accepting that there are places where you will need to change your response to a problem (how you think about it, feel about it, or what to do about it) is often the biggest hurdle. Very few people want to focus on changing their response. It's more common to build a strong case for why the other should do the changing.

It is human nature to try to change your partner instead of adjusting your expectations, but it doesn't work very well. You can influence each other, but that doesn't mean you can change each other. It is a hard truth that your partner has a limited capacity to respond to you, and you have a limited capacity to respond to your partner. This limited capacity is even more limited when people don't clearly talk about what they want and don't want.

It's easy to be considerate and loving to your partner when you are not confronted with a conflict of needs. Once that difference shows up though, your leadership and character are tested. You can engage in finger pointing or focus on what you can change: your perspective. Your perspective is likely to change when you understand more about yourself and your partner.

Relationship Conflict is a Call for Curiosity and Empathy

The first order of business in resolving conflict is to understand each partner's subjective internal reality: what are you thinking, feeling, and telling yourselves about this situation? Instead of getting curious about each other's internal reality and perceptions, we usually have an auto-pilot response of:

- Trying to impose our reality on our partners (controlling/engulfing our partners), via blame, domination, or whining. This includes all debating about "objective" reality: e.g. claims about what is "reasonable" or what "any normal person" would think or feel, "what you actually said" or "what actually happened." It also includes any version of "If you really cared about me, you'd..."
- Allowing ourselves to be controlled/engulfed via denial or resentful compliance,
- Disengaging/withdrawing (usually to protect against being engulfed). This includes shutting down, physically leaving, and hiding information about ourselves.
It is challenging to appreciate your own perspective/needs and your partners at the same time. It is a major goal of therapy to increase your ability to do this.

Effective Communication is a Craft

It takes lots of practice. That's because it combines a lot of skills, including:

Soothing and validating yourself so you can stay engaged through difficult emotions, such as fear, anger, grief, disappointment, and shame;

Watching your tone (trying not to blame or whine);

Being clear and direct rather than guarded or vague;

Not bypassing yourself or steamrolling your partner when faced with their desires, opinions and feelings;

Tracking and talking about what the problem means to you (beliefs and attitudes);

Tracking and talking about what you want from your partner during the discussion and the outcome you are seeking;

Demonstrating a genuine desire to understand your partner's concerns/desires/opinions;

Considering how you can help your partner become more responsive to you.

Tough Questions

In a strong disagreement, do you really believe your partner is entitled to their opinion?

Under duress, do you have the courage and tenacity to seek your partner's reality and the courage to express your own?

Do you insist on lecturing or debating with your partner when it is clear this does not produce the result you want? If so, why is that?

Do you know and care about the price your partner will have to pay to improve their response to you?

Are you trying to get your partner to treat you better than you treat him/her?

Are you trying to get your partner to treat you better than you treat yourself?

Some Questions to Consider before our first Session:

Here are some questions for you each to answer which will help you to focus and get the most out of your couples counselling.

- How committed am I to this relationship?

- What is not working in my relationship?

- What am I doing that keeps it from working?

- What is it I want and desire from my relationship?

- What kind of partner do I aspire to be?

- What do I need to change in order to become that person (feelings, thinking, attitude, behavior)?

- How would I describe our style/pattern of communication? how does this relate to my communication style in previous relationships?

- How do I handle my reactions to stress/anxiety (emotions of hurt, anger, fear)?
And how does it affect my relationship