

# How to Get the Most Out of Couples Therapy

Couples are often uncertain what to expect from the process of couples therapy. They're not sure of what to expect of the therapist or even if the therapist has any expectations of them.

I've found that most couples approach therapy with the idea that each person will describe their distress, and somehow the therapist will assist them to create a happier, more functional relationship. They expect to learn some new or better skills. However, most people hope their partner will do most of the learning in problem areas.

After years of clinical experience and specializing in working with couples, I've arrived at some guidelines that can make our work more effective. First, I do have some expectations of you and have certain principles and concepts that I believe give us the greatest chance for success.

I believe my primary role is to help you improve your responses to each other without violating your core values or deeply held principles. So that you may know some of my key guiding principles, I've created this document to provide clarity and focus to our work.

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 tools to help you become a more effective partner; they work best when you are clear about how you aspire to be.

## 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

## Tradeoffs and Tough Choices

**To create sustained improvement in your relationship you need:**

- A vision of the life you want to build together
- To have a life separate from your partner because you are not joined at the hip
- 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 tradeoff 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 new ways of thinking or doing things, listening & being curious instead of being defensive, and speaking up instead of becoming resentfully compliant or withdrawing. In the beginning there will be emotional risk-taking action, but you will never get to a better place if you stay exactly where you're at. In addition, few people are emotionally comfortable being confronted with how they're not living by their values, or being confronted with the consequences of their actions.

The other comfort that will be challenged is **energy comfort.** 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: **improving your reaction to problems.** For example, if one person is hypersensitive to criticism, and their partner is hypersensitive to feeling ignored, it will take effort to improve their sensitivity instead of just hoping the partner will stop ignoring or criticizing.

In all of 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's like pair figure skating – one person can't 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 couple's 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 and saying, "I don't know what to talk about, do you?" While this blank-slate approach may open some interesting doors, it's a hit-or-miss process.

The third common unproductive pattern is discussing whatever fight you are now in 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 couple's therapy sessions is for each person to do the following before each session:

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

Yes, this reflection takes some effort, but you wouldn't 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 be more than worth it.

### 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
- Identifying what to do and how to do it is often easy to identify. The bigger challenge is why you don't do it / haven't done 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 their 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
- The definite possibility exists that you have some flawed assumptions about your partner's motives, and they have some flawed assumptions about yours. The problem is, most of the time we don't want to believe those assumptions are flawed

#### **Focus on Changing Yourself Rather than Your Partner**

- 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 the objectives you set for yourself
- Problems occur when reality departs sharply from our expectations, hopes, desires, and concerns. It's human nature to try to change our partner instead of adjusting our expectations. However, it being human nature doesn't mean it's productive or helpful
- The hardest part of couples therapy is accepting that 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 person 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 things are going well. But when things get tough and your partner is irritating or upsetting you, that's when you get tested. Your leadership and your character get tested. You can choose to finger-point and blame them, or you can become more of how you aspire to be
- Fear lets you know you're not prepared. If you view fear in that mode, it becomes a signal to prepare the best you can
- You can learn a lot about yourself by understanding what annoys you and how you handle it
- The more you believe that your partner should be different, the less initiative you will take to change the patterns between you

### **Some Contradictions of Couples Therapy**

- All major goals have built-in contradictions, for example, speak up or keep the peace
- 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 / it's not what they say, it's what you hear
- Solutions, no matter how perfect, set the stage for new problems

### **Tough Questions**

- Asking good questions - of yourself and your partner - helps you uncover causes beneath causes
- 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 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? (Everything has a price and we always pay it)
- Can you legitimately expect your partner to treat you better than you treat them?
- 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 aspire to be 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 therapy. Effective communication means you need to pay attention to:**

- Managing unproductive emotional expression, such as anger that is too intense
- How you are communicating – whining, blaming, vague, etc.
- What you want from your partner during the discussion
- What the problem symbolizes to you
- 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.

No wonder good communication is so hard.

#### Some Final Thoughts...

- You can't create a flourishing relationship by only fixing what's wrong, but it's a start.
- Responding productively in a difficult situation is incredibly difficult, even with the best intentions. Practice, practice, and more practice. Practice the right things and you will get there.
- Love is destroyed when self-interest dominates.
- If you don't know what you feel in important areas of your relationship, it's like navigating a ship across the ocean without a compass.
- The possibility exists that we choose partners we need but sometimes don't necessarily want.
- Getting 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.
- It's impossible to be in a highly interdependent relationship without ever being judgmental or being judged.
- If you strive to always feel emotionally safe in your relationship and get it, you will pay the price by becoming dull.
- If neither of you ever rocks the boat, you will end up with a dull relationship
- Knowledge is not power. Only knowledge that is applied to a situation is power.

**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 in some way, even if other parts of you don't like it

**Three motivations will govern any sustained effort you make. You will seek to:**

1. Avoid pain or discomfort
2. Create more benefits
3. 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 aspire 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
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- Effective change requires insight plus action. Insight without action is passivity. Action without insight is impulsive. Insight plus action leads to clarity and change.
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- If you want to create a win-win solution, you cannot hold a position that has caused your partner to lose in the past.

- Please review this document periodically as there is simply too much to absorb in one reading of it. We all will benefit from your efforts.