

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

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 relationship you want
- 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 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 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 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 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 - 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 fights 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 plaintive question, "Are we getting anywhere?"

For a more powerful approach to your couples therapy, 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.

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 pay high dividends.

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 and continue to do what you know doesn't work.
- How to think differently about a problem is more effective than just trying to figure out what solution you should offer.
- 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.
- The definite possibility exists 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 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.
- Problems occur when our partner doesn't behave the way we think he/she should. It's human nature to try and change one's partner instead of adjusting our expectations. This aspect of human nature is what keeps therapists in business.
- 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). It's easier, but less productive, 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 the vistas are magnificent and the sun is shining. But when it gets bone chilling cold, you're hungry and tired, and your partner is whining and sniveling about how you got them into this mess, that's when your leadership and character get tested. You can join the finger pointing or act the way you aspire to be.
- You can learn a lot about yourself by understanding what annoys you and how you handle it.
- 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.
- The more you believe your partner should be different, the less initiative you will take to change the patterns between you.
- Love is destroyed when self-interest dominates.

Zen Aspects of Couples Therapy (Some Contradictions)

- 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.
- 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'll 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 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?

The Importance of Communication

- Communication is the number one presenting problem in couples counseling.
- 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.
- What doesn't work is:

Blaming and/or Dominating
 .Withdrawing
 .Responding with Disrespect/ Contempt
 .Staying in 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.
- The three most important qualities for effective communication are

Respect,
 Openness to listen and
 Persistence/ Patience.

- Effective communication means you need to pay attention to:

Managing unruly emotions, such as anger that is too intense
 .How you are communicating - whining, blaming, being vague, etc.
 .Being clear about knowing and expressing your needs in the conversation
 .Making clear and concise requests
 Listening – do you know your partner's major concerns
 How you can help your partner become more responsive to you
 How can you be more responsive to your partner
 The beliefs and attitudes you have about the problem & how they are impacting the discussion.

Motivation

- Everything you do works for some part of you, even if other parts of you don't like it. You might need to spend some time considering why you continue behavior that is counterproductive to your aspirations.
- Everything you do that takes a sustained effort is governed by three motivations:

1. .Avoid pain or discomfort
2. .Reap benefits involved
3. .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 aspire to be in that situation.
- If you want to create a win-win solution, listen, listen, listen.
- If you want to create a win-win solution, you cannot hold a position that has caused your partner to lose in the past.

Some Final Thoughts.

- Sometimes we choose partners we need to learn from or who balance us but don't necessarily want because our differences mean our relationship doesn't come easily.
- Often partners give and receive messages about love differently. It's important to learn what each of your need to feel valued.
- 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, you will pay the price by becoming dull. If you don't argue with each other, you will end up with a dull relationship.
- It's normal for couples to argue. Learning *HOW* you argue fairly is more important to your marriage's success than resolving any specific problem or conflict.

What works:

.Learn from the past
 .Adapt to changing conditions, stages in your life together
 .Predict probable future problems and take action
 Listen with an open mind and curiosity BEFORE you try to propose solutions.
 Accept personal responsibility for your own thoughts, emotions and actions.

You can't create a flourishing relationship by only fixing what's wrong, but it's a start. I look forward to working with you to develop grace for yourself and for your partner while you each learn the patience to practice, practice, practice listening and communicating more effectively. I hope that through the process you will rekindle the interest, trust and openness that your relationship once had while learning more about yourself and your partner.

For more information or an appointment, contact:
 Donna Sigl-Davies, MA, PCC-S
 Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor
 Tapestry Counseling Associates, LLC
 6797 N. High St., Ste 244 • Worthington, OH 43085
 ph: 614/ 505-7561 x 211; fax: 505-7562

"Creating space to exhale and open to transformation."

Other Resources:

The Gottman Institute:

<http://www.gottman.com/marriage/>