

How to get the most from couples therapy

This document is designed to help you prepare for our sessions so you can get the most benefit from our work together. It is highly recommended that you create your own individual objectives for being in therapy, so that I can 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, not how you'd like your partner to change.

My goal is to help each of you improve your 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 this new knowledge to break ineffective patterns and develop better ones. Think about your answers to these three questions before our first session:

- What kind of life do you want to build together?
- How do you aspire to be as a partner in order to build the kind of life and relationship you want to create?
- What are your personal blocks to becoming the kind of partner you aspire to be?

My job will be to support you in developing the skills and knowledge needed to achieve what you want.

Tradeoffs and tough choices

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. First this means emotional comfort, going out on a limb to try new ways of being, thinking or doing things; listening and being curious instead of butting in; speaking up instead of becoming resentfully compliant or withdrawing. Emotional risk-taking will be required. Few people are comfortable about being confronted with how they don't live their values or with the consequences of their actions. The other comfort that will be challenged is energy comfort. It 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 third tough choice is even more difficult - improving your 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 criticising.

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 maximise 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 your 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?" This 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 unproductive.

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

1. Reflect on your larger objectives for being in therapy, not just the current issues.
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.

The importance of communication

The three most important qualities for effective communication are respect, openness and persistence. Communication is the number one presenting problem in couples counselling. Effective communication means you need to pay attention to:

- Managing your unruly reactions, such as anger that is too intense or refusal to talk.
- How you are communicating – whining, blaming, being vague, etc.
- What you want from your partner during the discussion.
- Clarifying your beliefs and attitudes about the problem. What the problem symbolises to you.
- The outcome you want from the discussion.
- Listening to your partner's major concerns.
- Practicing how you can help your partner become more responsive to you

Improving communication 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. 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. 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.

Important concepts for couples therapy and relationships

Attitude is key

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

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 objectives you set for yourself. It's human nature to try and change our partner instead of adjusting our expectations. This aspect of human nature is what keeps therapists in business.

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. 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

All significant growth comes from disagreements, dissatisfaction with the current status, or 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.

If you want your partner to change, 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?"

Some final thoughts

Trust is the foundational building block of a flourishing relationship. You create trust by doing what you say you will do.

Businesses and relationships 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 thoughtless. Insight without action is passivity.

Adapted from: <https://www.couplesinstitute.com/couples-blog/>