

GETTING THE MOST FROM COUPLES THERAPY

Couples are often uncertain about what to expect from couples therapy. They know neither what to expect from the therapist, nor what the therapist will expect from them. After many years of clinical practice, I have arrived at some guidelines that can make our work together more effective.

I have found most couples approach therapy with the notion that each person will describe their distress and then — somehow — the therapist will assist them to create a happier, more functional relationship. They expect to learn some new or better skills. And of course, they expect *their partner* should do most of the changing!

I believe my primary role is to help you improve your responses to each other. 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.

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 more productive 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
- Your individual blocks to becoming the kind of partner you aspire to be
- The skills and knowledge necessary to do the above tasks

To create sustained improvement in your relationship you will need:

- A vision of the life you want to build together
- To have a life separate from your partner, as well as one with your partner
- The appropriate attitudes and skills to work as a team
- Motivation to persist



- The willingness to show your partner the best and worst parts of yourself

To create the relationship you really desire, there will be tradeoffs and tough choices:

- Time. It 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, such as your personal time or professional time.
- Comfort: This means emotional comfort, like trying novel ways of thinking or behaving, listening with curiosity instead of butting in, and speaking up instead of becoming resentfully compliant or withdrawing.
- Effort. It takes the effort of both partners to sustain improvement over time, stay conscious about your behaviors, remember to be more respectful, giving, appreciative, etc. A marriage is like pairs figure skating — if only one person in the pair works hard, the team cannot be exceptional.

Maximize the Value of Your Couples Therapy Sessions

Avoid the common unproductive patterns of:

- Making the focus be whatever happens to be on someone's mind at the moment. This is a reactive (and mostly ineffective) approach to working things through.
- Showing up and saying, "I don't know what I want to talk about, do you?" While this blank slate approach may open some interesting doors, it is a hit or miss process. Remember that few people would call an important meeting and then say, "Well, I don't have anything to discuss, does anyone else have anything to say?"
- Discussing whatever fight you are now in or whatever fight you had since the last session. Discussing these fights/arguments without the larger context of what you wish to learn from the experience is often an exercise in spinning your wheels.

A more powerful approach is for each partner to prepare ahead of time for 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 partner you aspire to become.
- Arrive with an observation or insight about yourself or your partner that you think would be helpful to explore.



Important Relationship Concepts

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

- Focus on changing yourself rather than your partner. The hardest part of couples therapy is accepting that you will need to improve your responses to problems (how you think, feel, or act). Very few people want to focus on improving their response. It's more common — and a lot easier — to build a strong case for why the other should do the improving.
- 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, yet this rarely works.
- 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.
- When it comes to improving your relationship, your attitude toward change is more important than knowing exactly what action to take.
- 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 toward maturity.
- The possibility exists that you have some flawed assumptions about your partner's motives and that he/she has some flawed assumptions about yours.
- All significant growth comes from disagreements, dissatisfaction with the current status, or a desire 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 easy to be considerate and loving to your partner when the vistas are magnificent, the sun is shining and breezes are gentle. 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 you get tested. Your leadership and your character get tested. You can join the finger pointing or become the person you aspire to be.
- You can learn a lot about yourself (and your partner) by understanding what annoys you (or your partner) 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.
- 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?
- Can you legitimately expect your partner to treat you better than you treat him/her?
- 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 three most important qualities for effective communication are respect, openness and persistence.
- 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.
- Love is destroyed when self-interest dominates.
- The possibility exists that we choose partners we need but don't necessarily want.
- 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 having conflict.
- Everything you do works for some part of you, even if other parts of you don't like it.



- If you strive to always feel emotionally safe in your relationship and accomplish that, you will pay the price by being in a relationship that feels dull.
- Knowledge is not power. Only knowledge that is applied is power.
- Effective change requires insight plus action. Insight without action is passivity. Action without insight is impulsive. Insight plus action leads to clarity and power.
- If you want to create a win-win solution, you cannot hold a position that has caused your partner to lose in the past.
- Businesses and marriages fail for the same three reasons. A failure to learn from the past, adapt to changing conditions, and predict probable future problems then taking action to prevent them.

Effective Communication

Effective communication means you need to pay attention to:

- Managing unruly emotions, such as intense anger.
- How you are communicating - be it whining, blaming, being 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.

This article is adapted from "How to Get the Most from Your Couples Therapy," written by Peter Pearson, Ph.D., 4-12-05, © Copyright MMIV The Couples Institute