

INTRODUCTION TO COUPLE'S THERAPY

This document is designed to help you get the most benefit from couple's therapy. The therapeutic tools I have to help you become a more effective partner work best when you are clear about what you bring to your relationship and honest with yourself and your partner. To be effective you need to create a set of your own individual objectives for being in therapy. Like a good coach, my job is to help you reach those goals. My goal is to help you each make better adjustments and responses to each other without violating your values or deeply held principles. Working together, we will build on the strengths and resources which already exist in your relationship and reestablish a sense of hope for you and your partner.

Goals and Objectives of Couples Therapy

The first aim of therapy is to increase your knowledge about yourself, your partner and emotional and behavioral patterns which you and your partner have developed. Therapy becomes effective as you apply new knowledge to break unhelpful patterns while developing better ones. Together you can begin to understand what is not working and how to build on the strengths and hope which you and your partner already have.

To create sustained improvement in your relationship couples therapy will help you and your partner create a vision of the life you want to build, both together and individually. We will work on developing positive attitudes and skills to work as a team and the skills to communicate in a more respectful and positive way. Managing conflict, increasing trust and developing shared commitment are also possible with successful couples counseling.

In order for couples therapy to be successful both partners must be prepared to compromise.

The first compromise will be 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 – 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 and being curious instead of butting in, speaking up instead of becoming resentfully compliant or withdrawing. Few people are emotionally comfortable being confronted with how they don't live their values or the unintended consequences of their actions. Sitting with the discomfort caused by emotional vulnerability in couple's therapy is an important part of the healing process.

Engaging in couple's therapy and the work necessary to shift a troubled relationship also takes energy and motivation. It also takes effort to sustain improvement over time: staying conscious of making a difference, remembering to be more respectful, more giving or more appreciative. It also takes effort for people to improve their reactivity to words or events.

In all these areas, there is generally a conflict between short-term gratification and the long-term goal of creating a satisfying relationship. In an interdependent relationship, effort is required on the part of each person to make a sustained improvement. Like any team activity, one person cannot do most of the work and still create an exceptional team.

How to Maximize the Value from your Couples Therapy Sessions

The most effective approach to your couple's sessions is for each person to reflect on their objectives before each session. 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. Such reflection will take effort. Few people would schedule an important meeting and then say, "Well, I don't have anything to bring up, does anyone else have anything on their agenda?" Preparation will pay off with better results.

Try to come to therapy sessions relaxed and ready to work. Just like going to the gym, success in your fitness goals is unlikely if you are hung-over, sleep deprived or distracted. Take the time before sessions to center yourself. Turn off your radio and phone on the drive to the office to allow time to mentally prepare for each session.

Coming to session unprepared or stressed will impede progress. Another 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. A similarly 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 and the patterns which influence your relationship is often an exercise in futility.

Thinking Points for Couple's Therapy and Relationships

The following ideas can help identify areas of focus in our work and stimulate discussion between you and your partner between meetings. You will discover that your reflections and associations change over time. Therefore it is important to revisit this list in order to help you keep focus during our work.

1. *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 what is restraining you from actually doing it.
- How to think differently about a problem is often more effective than just trying to figure out what action to take.
- There are limitations in your partner's ability to respond to you. There are also limitations in your ability to respond to your partner. Accepting this is important for progress to be made.
- Remember that you likely have flawed assumptions about your partner's motives and he/she has flawed assumptions about yours. Be open to learning how you may have misunderstood your partner or made inaccurate assumptions.

2. *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 reality departs sharply from our expectations, hopes, desires and concerns. It is 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.
- It is difficult to change your reactive tendencies to your partner's behavior. Often people focus on building a 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 is 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 blaming you for getting them into this mess, that is when you get tested. Your leadership and your character get tested. You can join the finger pointing or become what you aspire to be.
- You can learn a lot about yourself by understanding what annoys you 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.

3. *Zen Aspects of Couples Therapy (Some Contradictions)*

- "You are entitled to your labor but not the fruits of your labor". By letting go of the expectation that your hard work should change your partner, your partner is more likely to change.
- Positive expectations for change help facilitate progress. However, our attachment to those expectations can be a set up for disappointment.
- Significant growth comes from disagreements, dissatisfaction with the current status, or a striving to make things better. 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. Presenting information in a way your partner can hear goes a long way.

4. *Questions to think about*

- 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?
- 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?

- When a problem shows up, it is natural to think “What should I do about it?”
A much more productive question might be, “How do I aspire to be in this situation?”

5. *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 counseling.
- Effective communication means you need to pay attention to:
 1. Slowing down and making time to reflect on your own emotional process.
 2. Managing unruly emotions like anger and anxiety.
 3. How you are communicating – whining, blaming, being vague, etc.
 4. What you really need from your partner during the discussion.
 5. What the problem symbolizes to you.
 6. The outcome you want from the discussion.
 7. Your partner’s major concerns.
 8. How you can help your partner become more responsive to you.
 9. The beliefs and attitudes you have about the problem.

Some Final Thoughts...

Most of the ineffective things we do in relationships fall into a small number of categories:

- Blame or attempt to dominate
- Disengage/withdraw
- Resentful compliance
- Complain
- Denial or confusion

These are the normal reactions to feeling a threat or the anxiety we experience when facing our fears or uncertainties. Improving your relationship means better management of these reactions.

Relationships play a central role in our everyday happiness and satisfaction. I look forward to meeting with you and appreciate the opportunity to help you and your partner improve your relationship.

Evan Freedman, PhD, ABPP
Licensed Clinical Psychologist #2306