

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM YOUR COUPLES THERAPY

After 25 years of clinical experience and specializing in working with hundreds of couples, I have arrived at some guidelines that can make our work more effective. My primary role is to help you create a more secure connection, improve your responsiveness to each other without violating your core values, and make it safe for you to voice important truths. I have many tools to help you become better partners, but these tools work best as you are able to gain clarity about your vision of how you would like your relationship to be.

Couples are often uncertain about the process of couples therapy. Most people seek therapy when their relationship has evolved into a painful, negative cycle and they feel stuck in knowing how to change it. They hope that the therapist will hear their distress and will assist them to create a happier, closer relationship. Most, however, hope their partner will do most of the changing.

FOCUS ON CHANGING YOURSELF RATHER THAN YOUR PARTNER

Couples therapy works best if you have more goals for yourself than for your partner. 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 own responses. It's more common 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 does not mean you can change each other. Becoming a more effective partner is the most powerful way to change a relationship. Once you begin to feel safer and more understood, it is easier to be more vulnerable and look at your own contributions.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF COUPLES THERAPY

The major aim of couples therapy is to:

- Increase your knowledge about yourself, your partner, and your patterns of feeling/behavior/thinking that create conflict, insecurity, and distance in the relationship;
- Develop a better repair mechanism to resolve old issues from the past and more effectively process present/future issues.
- Increase trust and responsiveness to each other's need
- Support each partner's ability to give voice to his/her truths.
- Expand your ability to positively nurture your relationship.

Simply put, couples therapy should help make crystal clear:

- The kind of life and relationship you want to build together
- The kind of partner you aspire to be in order to build the kind of relationship you want to create
- Your individual blocks to becoming the kind of partner you desire to be
- The skills and knowledge necessary to do the above tasks.

RISKS VS REWARDS

To create the relationship you really desire, there will likely be some difficult trade-offs and tough choices for each person.

TIME It takes time to create a relationship that flourishes: time to be together, to play, to nurture, to hang out, to plan, to share with your family, and so on. This time will encroach on some other valuable areas of your personal or professional time, so be prepared. 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.

ACTION Change occurs faster when partners are prepared to take risks of trying to interact differently outside the session. Often it will feel safer to talk about the tough issues in the protected context of therapy.

Effective change requires insight plus action. Insight without action is passivity. Action without insight is impulsivity. Insight plus action leads to clarity and power.

The more you are willing to use your new insights by putting them into action, the more rewarding the changes in your marital dance.