

## How to Get the Most from Your Couples Therapy

Adapted from an article by Peter Pearson, PhD, © Copyright MMIII 04.12.05 The Couples Institute

*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 you're wondering how your  
partner got you into this mess, that's when you get tested.  
Your character gets tested, providing you an opportunity to become the person you aspire to be.*

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Couples are often uncertain what to expect from the process of couples therapy. This is understandable. They are not sure of what to expect of the therapist or even if the therapist has any expectations of them.

I have found that most couples approach therapy with the notion that each person will describe their distress, they'll learn some new or better skills, and somehow the therapist will assist them to create a happier, more functional relationship. However, most people hope their partner will do most of the learning in problem areas. And they often find it difficult to imagine that the relationship wounds can genuinely heal.

I believe my primary role is to help you improve your responses to each other without violating your core values or deeply held principles. The following guidelines can make our work together more effective.

First, I actually do have some expectations of you. 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 – these will work best when you are clear about how you aspire to be.

### **Goals and Objectives of Couples Therapy**

The major aim of therapy is to increase your knowledge about both yourself and your partner, and about 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 to increase 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 to create
- 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 because you are not joined at the hip
- The appropriate attitudes and skills to work as a team
- The motivation and patience 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.

### **Tradeoffs and Tough choices**

*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: emotional comfort; for example, 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 in deciding to take action, but you will never explore different worlds if you always keep sight of the shoreline. In addition—although I'm getting ahead of myself to say this— you will soon find out the gem of this work: *You may start feeling closer to your partner, and they to you, when you bring your deepest self into the relationship by taking these emotional risks.**

The other comfort that will be challenged is *energy comfort*. It simply takes effort to sustain improvement over time.

As a couple you will also each be challenged to improve 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 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.

### **The Most Productive Way to Approach Each Therapy Sessions**

There are three common but unproductive patterns that can happen in couples therapy.

One is making the focus of the therapy be whatever problem happens to be on someone's mind at that moment. This is a *reactive* (and mostly ineffective) approach to working things through.

The second is showing up and 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 approach, and might waste energy and time. 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 third common unproductive pattern can be discussing whatever fight you are in now or were in recently. Discussing these fights/arguments without a larger context of what you wish to learn from the experience is often an exercise in wheel spinning.

Over time, repeating these patterns will lead to the plaintive question, "Are we getting anywhere?"

A more powerful approach to your couple's therapy sessions is for each person to do the following before each session:

1. Remind yourself of 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.

### **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 in 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 your choice of action to take. Identifying what to do and how to do it is often easy. The bigger challenge might be why you don't do it. It's human nature to try and change one's partner instead of adjusting our expectations. This aspect of human nature is what keeps couples therapists in business!

This may surprise you: You can't actually change your partner. Your partner can't change you either. 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.* 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 that you set for yourself.

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 response. It's more common to build a strong case for why the other should do the improving.

#### ***Recognize and Break Failed Patterns***

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.

Businesses and marriages fail for the same three reasons. A failure to:

- Learn from the past
- Adapt to changing conditions
- Predict probable future problems and take action.

### **Conflict Produces Growth**

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.

You can learn a lot about yourself by understanding what annoys you and how you handle it.

### **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? How can they appreciate what they don't fully understand.?)

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?

### **The Importance of Communication**

Communication is the number one presenting problem in couples counseling. Good communication is much more difficult to achieve than most people want to believe. Effective negotiation is even harder. The three most important qualities for effective communication are:

- Respect
- Openness
- 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. 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, 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.

No wonder good communication is so hard!

### **Some Final Thoughts...**

If you strive to always feel emotionally safe in your relationship --if neither of you ever rocks boat-- you will pay the price by ending up with a dull relationship.

You can't create a flourishing relationship by just fixing what's wrong...but it's a start....

Grace under pressure does not spring full-grown, even with the best of intentions. But practice the right things and you will get there!

We are all responsible for how we express ourselves, *no matter* how others treat us.

Love is destroyed when self-interest dominates.

If you don't know what you *feel* in important areas of your relationship, it is like playing high stakes poker when you see only half your cards. You will make a lot of uninformed and costly decisions!

We *each* choose who will help us work through our childhood issues, forcing us to grow in the process. We each might find, along the way, that we don't want to have to work that hard. The alternate possibility exists as well, that the person you choose might be the one who isn't ready yet to do that hard work.

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.

Knowledge is not power. Only knowledge that is applied is power.

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

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*Please review this document periodically as there is simply too much to absorb in one reading of it. We all will benefit from your efforts.*