

What to Expect from Couple Therapy

The information in here will help you prepare for couples therapy, so you know what to expect and how to prepare to get the most out of our work together. I've also included a summary of some useful concepts that relate to couples therapy, and some discussion points you can explore together.

Goals and Objectives of Couples Therapy

The overall aim of therapy is to build greater self-awareness, an increased understanding of your partner, and your patterns for interacting and communicating. Therapy aims to create awareness to break ineffective patterns and develop better ones.

Couples going into therapy explore important questions such as:

What kind of life do we want to build together?

What kind of partner do I aspire to be so that we can build this life?

What is stopping me from becoming the kind of partner I aspire to be?

What skills and knowledge will help me get there?

What to expect

The primary focus of couple's therapy is always the relationship between you and your partner. As a therapist I'm your coach. I draw on my training and experience to help you create your own individual goals for being in therapy, and help you work to achieve them. Each of you will have different ideas of what you want to achieve through therapy, and during the sessions we have together I work with each of you to adjust how you respond and communicate with each other, without violating your core values or deeply held principles.

Trade-offs and Tough Choices

Change takes work. To create genuine, positive and lasting change in your relationship, each person will need to make some difficult trade-offs and tough choices.

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. To make this time you will need to make sacrifices in other areas which may also be valuable to you, be it personal or professional time.

Creating change will be uncomfortable

You will experience emotional discomfort, as you take risks and try to find new ways of thinking or doing things. It can mean listening and being curious, instead of rushing in to speak your mind, or speaking up instead of becoming resentfully compliant or withdrawing. Therapy is confronting, but you cannot explore new ways of being together and create positive change without being challenged and taking emotional risks.

Be prepared to stick with it

Learning any new skill takes concentrated and persistent effort, and learning new ways of responding to your partner is no different. Change doesn't happen overnight, and you can go through short term bumps for long term gains. Both individuals need to be committed and motivated to stick with it even if it feels hard at first, because it will.

It takes persistence and effort to remind yourself not to simply react as you always have, and instead adjust your behaviour and thinking patterns. Staying aware of how you react to everyday, as well as difficult situations takes commitment. It takes time and effort to be more respectful, more giving, more appreciative, or whatever change you need to make over the long-term.

Making the most of your Couples Therapy Sessions

When people come to couples or relationship therapy for the first time, without proper preparation, they can get caught up talking about whatever the issue or argument of the day happens to be, or whatever is top of mind. When couples do this, they fail to address the bigger-picture patterns and habits that are contributing to their disharmony. Alternatively some come to therapy with no clear idea of what they want to explore, and you can waste valuable time with your therapist trying to uncover the big issues.

You would always put time and effort into preparing for any important meeting in other areas of your life, and your therapy sessions are no different. To begin your therapy fully prepared, and to make the most of your time, think through a few things beforehand. Ask yourself:

- What do I want to achieve through my therapy?
- What kind of relationship do I want to create?
- What kind of partner do I want to become?
- What would I have to do to make this happen?

Your therapy has the potential to change your life for the better, but only if you're prepared to put in the effort to help create that change. Preparation will always pay-off.

Important Concepts for Relationships and Couples Therapy

There are a number of important ideas that can help you and your partner identify areas to focus on, and stimulate discussion between meetings. Returning to these ideas from time to time throughout your therapy can be very helpful, and you will discover that your reflections and associations will change as you progress.

Attitude is Key

When it comes to improving your relationship, your attitude toward change is more important than what action to take. It's often easy to see what you need to do, and the real challenge is why you're not doing it. Approaching therapy as an opportunity to explore and learn to think differently about a problem is often more effective than just trying to figure out what action to take.

Acceptance

Accepting your and your partner's limitations to respond to each other is the first step to developing a mature relationship. It is likely that you hold some flawed assumptions about your partner's motives, and that they also hold flawed assumptions about you. Accepting the possibility that we are flawed in our thinking is one of the hardest things for anyone to do, and is often the path to growth and positive change.

Focus on Changing Yourself Rather than Your Partner

Most of the ineffective things we do in relationships fall into just a few categories. Do you ever blame or attempt to dominate? Disengage or withdraw from conflict? Practice resentful compliance? Whine, deny or confuse? These are the normal emotional reactions to feeling a threat or high stress. Improving your relationship means learning to manage these reactions better.

It is very common for couples to enter therapy thinking their partner is the one who should change. Many people have built a strong case for why the other person needs to improve. The reality is, you can influence each other, but you can't change each other. You can't change or control someone else's behavior, or their attitude. You can, however, change yourself. The more you believe your partner should be different, the less initiative you will take to change the patterns between you. If you recognise your own need to change, and understand your contribution to the relationship, you can alter how you think, feel or respond to a problem. By doing this you can significantly change the dynamics in the relationship.

Couples therapy works best if you have more goals for yourself than for your partner, and helping you to reach your own goals is when I can really work at my best as a therapist. You can learn a lot about yourself by understanding what annoys you and how you handle it. Your goals in your relationship therapy should primarily focus on how you can become a better partner, even when times are tough. After all, it's easy to be loving and caring when you are relaxed and happy, but is it how you respond to the most difficult times that can be the most challenging.

Couples approach therapy with a spirit of curiosity, who are willing to avoid finger-pointing, and take responsibility for their own individual growth, are likely to achieve the best results as a couple.

Fear is a signal to prepare

It is normal for people to feel fear when they go into therapy. You can be unsure of what will happen, what you will uncover. Fear can be a signal that you need more preparation. If you approach fear like this it can be a sign to take courage and prepare as best you can.

The Zen of Couples Therapy (Some Contradictions)

Most major goals have inbuilt trade-offs and contradictions. Do you speak up, or keep the peace. Be honest, or diplomatic? 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 is how you can learn to manage the inevitable disagreements that are a part life, and build a more harmonious relationship.

The right questions

Asking good questions, of yourself and your partner, helps you uncover the deeper causes of conflict. When you're in the midst of a strong disagreement, how often do you cling to the idea you are right and they are wrong? Most of us would struggle to see the other person's point of view in a heated argument, our gut instinct is often to hold on to and protect our own perspective.

With help and guidance, you can learn to change your instinctual responses. It takes courage and tenacity to seek out and understand your partner's perspective when you are in an emotionally charged conflict. It also takes a great deal of courage to clearly express your own view when the stakes are high.

When we have to deal with a problem, it's natural to ask the question "What should I do about it?". The problem with this, particularly in a conflict situation, is that it doesn't take the other person into account. When you're trying to resolve a conflict, a better question to ask is "How do I aspire to be in this situation?".

Some other questions you can ask, that will help you think about your situation differently, are:

Why is it important to let your partner know what you think, feel and are concerned about?

Change always comes at a cost - what is the price your partner will have to pay to improve how they respond to you? How much do you care about that price?

Can you legitimately expect your partner to treat you better than you treat them?

Can you legitimately expect your partner to treat you better than you treat yourself?

If you want your partner to change, what you can do to make it easier for them to make that change?

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, and it is the most common problem for couples who begin couples counselling.

When you are trying to create a shared vision of how you want to be as a couple, communication and negotiation are essential. Both people need to speak from the heart about what really matters to them.

Effective communication takes effort and skill. It means you need to pay attention to understand:

How to manage unruly emotions, such as intense anger or hurt

How you are communicating, and how to avoid behaviour that will hamper communication, such as whining, blaming, or being vague

What you want from your partner during the discussion

What the problem represents for 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...

Consider and discuss these ideas:

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

Grace under pressure does not spring full-grown from nowhere, even with the best of intentions. It takes practice, practice and more practice, and you will get there.

Love is destroyed when self-interest dominates.

Self-awareness is key. 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, and you will make a lot of bad plays.

The possibility exists that we choose partners we need but don't necessarily want.

To get to the bottom of a problem often means you must first accept how complex it is.

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.

If you strive to always feel emotionally safe in your relationship, and if neither of you ever rocks the boat, you will end up with a dull relationship.

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

Effective change requires insight plus action. Action without insight is thoughtless. Insight without action is passivity. If you want to create a win-win solution, you cannot hold a position that has caused your partner to lose in the past.

"To be a champ you have to believe in yourself when nobody else will."
(Sugar Ray Robinson, middleweight boxing champion).

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