

How to Get The Most From Your Couples Therapy

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

I have found most couples approach therapy with the notion that each person will describe their distress, and somehow the therapist will assist them to create a happier, more functional, relationship. They expect to learn some new or better skills. However, most people hope their partner will do most of the learning in problem areas.

I believe my primary role is to help you improve your responses to each other without violating your core values or deeply held principles. So that you may know some of my key guiding principles, I am providing you with this document to help you gain clarity and focus to our work.

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 better 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 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

Tradeoffs and Tough Choices

To create sustained improvement in your relationship you need:

- A vision of the life you want to build together
- The appropriate attitudes and skills to work as a team
- The motivation 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.

How to Maximize the Value from your Couples Therapy Sessions

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

1. Reflect on 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 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 what action to take.

Identifying what to do and how to do it is often easy to identify. The bigger challenge is why you don't do it.

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.



Co-Founder and Director Ellyn Bader, Ph.D.

www.couplesinstitute.com



Founders and Directors Ellyn Bader, Ph.D. and Peter Pearson, Ph.D.

www.couplesinstitute.com

You are quite limited in your ability to respond to your partner. Accepting that is a huge step into maturity.

The definite possibility exists that you have some flawed assumptions about your partner's motives, and he/she has some flawed assumptions about yours. The problem is, most of the time we don't want to believe those assumptions are flawed.

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 you set for yourself.

Problems occur when reality departs sharply from our expectations, hopes, desires, and concerns. It's human nature to try to change one's partner instead of adjusting our expectations. This aspect of human nature is what keeps therapists in business.

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.

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'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 how you aspire to become.

Nothing is impossible for the person who doesn't have to do it.

Fear lets you know you're not prepared. If you view fear in that mode, it becomes a signal to prepare the best you can.

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.

Zen Aspects of Couples Therapy (Some Contradictions)

All major goals have built-in contradictions, for example, speak up or keep the peace.

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.

It's not what you say. It's what they hear.

Solutions, no matter how perfect, set the stage for new problems.

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? (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? (Everything has a price and we always pay it.)

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?"

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:

- 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.

The three most important qualities for effective communication are respect, openness, and persistence.

P.S. 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.

