

How to Get the Most from Couples Counselling

(Adapted from the Couples Institute. Used by Permission)

This document is designed to help you get the most benefit from couples counselling.

Your task is to create your own individual objectives for being in therapy. My task is to help you reach those objectives. My goal is to help you change your responses to each other without going against your core values or violating your ethical standards or moral principles.

Goals and Objectives of Couples Counselling

A major aim of therapy is to increase your knowledge about yourself, your partner and the way you interact with each other. Therapy becomes effective as you apply new knowledge to break ineffective patterns of interaction and develop better ones. In an interdependent relationship such as yours, each person must make the required efforts if improvement is to be sustained.

Essential to couples therapy is 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.

In order to create sustained improvement in your relationship you need:

- ✚ A vision of the life you want both individually and as a relationship partner
- ✚ The appropriate attitudes and skills to work as a team
- ✚ The motivation to persist
- ✚ Time to review progress

To create the relationship you really want, each person will have to make sacrifices and face up to some tough choices. You will have to sacrifice:

- Time – it takes time to create a thriving relationship: time to be together, time to be with family, time to play, time to plan. This might require you to choose between areas of your life that might be just as important to you, including your personal and professional time. Remember too, that you will have to prioritize time to come to therapy.
- Comfort - that is, emotional comfort. You will be required to take emotional risk – to become vulnerable. This will involve new ways of thinking and doing things like listening and being curious about what your partner is feeling and thinking, It will involve speaking up instead of being resentful and withdrawing..

- Energy – it takes effort to sustain improvement over time, remembering to be more respectful, more giving, more appreciative. It takes effort to remember and act consistently on what you learn in therapy.

You will have to change your usual ways of reacting to problems - for example, if you are hypersensitive to criticism, and your partner is hypersensitive to feeling ignored, it will take effort to improve your sensitivity instead of hoping your partner will stop ignoring or criticizing.

Your responsibility

A good approach to your therapy sessions would be for each person to do the following before each session:

1. Reflect on your objectives for coming to counselling.
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.

This reflection will take some effort. 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.

Important Concepts for Couples Therapy and Relationships

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

It is certain that you have some flawed assumptions about your partner's motives. And that he/she has some flawed assumptions about yours. The problem is, most of the time we don't want to believe that our assumptions are flawed.

Focus on Changing Yourself Rather than on Changing Your Partner

Couples therapy works best if you have more goals for yourself than for your partner. It's human nature to try to change one's partner instead of adjusting our expectations

The hardest part of couple's therapy is accepting that you will need to improve how you think, feel, or what to do about a problem. Very few people want to focus on improving their own responses to a problem. 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.

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.

Some Contradictions about Couples Counselling

- All major goals have built-in contradictions, for example, speak up or say nothing.
- All 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 your partner hears.
- 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 his/her opinion?
- When you have disagreements and the stakes are high, do you have the courage and tenacity to seek your partner's reality and the courage to express your reality?
- Why is it important to let your partner know what you think, feel and are concerned about?
- 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'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?"

The Importance of Communication

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

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

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, being 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.

Some Final Thoughts...

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

Trust is the foundation of a flourishing relationship. You create trust by doing what you say you will do. It’s impossible to be in an inter-dependent relationship without ever being judgmental or being judged. If you expect to always feel emotionally safe in your relationship and get it, the price will be a dull relationship. If neither of you ever rocks the boat, you will end up with a dull relationship

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.

If you are asking your partner to change something, sometimes it’s a good idea to ask if the change is consistent with how he/she aspires to be in that situation.

Effective change requires insight plus action. Action without insight is thoughtless, while 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. Remember to always look for a win-win solution.

Noeline Husbands, M.A., M.A. (F.L.E.)

WISE Counsellor Associates – #38 Hunter Street, Woodbrook., Trinidad and Tobago

E-mail: wisecounselortt@gmail.com: www.trinidadwisecounselor.com Tel: (868) 768-6477