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How to Get the Most From Your Couples Therapy

Couples are often uncertain what to expect from the process of couples therapy. 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 and changing rather than seeing their role in what is not working and being intent on changing themselves.** This is not how to get the most from your couples therapy. Read on.

So that you may know some of my key guiding principles, I am sharing this document to provide clarity and focus to our work.

Goals and Objectives of Couples Therapy

A 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.

Key tasks of couples therapy include increasing your clarity about:

- The kind of life you want to build together.
- The kind of partner you aspire to be.
- Your individual blocks to becoming the kind of partner you aspire to be.

To create sustained improvement in your relationship you need:

- To learn the knowledge and practice the skills necessary to be the kind of partner you aspire to be.
- 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 to persist even when it feels daunting or is tiresome.

To create the relationship you really desire, there will be some difficult tradeoffs and tough choices for each person:

- **The first tradeoff will be time.** It simply takes time to create a relationship that flourishes: time to be together, time to play, time to coordinate, nurture, relax and time to plan and review progress. This time will encroach on some other valuable areas - your personal and/or professional time.
- **The second tradeoff is comfort.** Emotional comfort is challenged when you go out on a limb to try novel ways of thinking or doing things, such as: listening and being curious instead of butting in, speaking up instead of becoming resentfully compliant or withdrawing, taking action that is new and scary for you, or being confronted with the consequences of your actions.
- **The third tradeoff is expenditure of energy.** It takes concerted effort to garner and sustain improvement over time. Energy is required to stay conscious of remembering to be more respectful, more giving, more appreciative and maneuvering differently in your relationship over time.
- **The fourth tradeoff is foregoing your habitual ways of responding to a problem.** This effort is even more difficult for some people because it requires changing the way you respond to your partner when there is a problem or complaint. You will be asked to take a look at how you self-regulate yourself internally (or not), because this is directly related to how you respond to problems.

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 transformational change and sustain improvements. This is because it is rare to never that problems in a relationship rest solely on the shoulders of only one person. Even when it appears on the surface that one person is overwhelmingly responsible for the conflicts that exist, nine times out of ten, both people contribute, though we may have to be a detective to unearth the clues that shed light on this reality.

How to Maximize the Value from your Couples Therapy Sessions

Here are some common (yet unproductive) patterns that occur in therapy when couples do not keep sight of their overarching goals and objectives:

- Putting a superficial and blaming focus on whatever problem happens to be on someone's mind at the moment. This is a reactive (and mostly ineffective) approach to working things through. Better to be proactive and focus on how the problem relates to the goals you have set for yourself. What do you want to do differently? How do you want to be as you tackle the problem at hand?
- The second unproductive pattern is showing up to a session and saying "I don't know what to talk about, do you?"
- The third common unproductive pattern is describing whatever fight you are now in or whatever argument you have had since the last session. Simply describing or reenacting these fights/arguments without a larger context of what you wish to learn from the experience is often an exercise in spinning your wheels. A better approach is to use the session to reflect on how you could have shown up differently, how you strayed from your goal of being different, how you are struggling to be different in the here and now, etc.

A more powerful approach to utilize in your couples therapy sessions is for each person to do the following before each session:

- Reflect on your objectives for being in therapy.
- Think about your next step that supports the kind of relationship you wish to create, or challenges you to be the partner you aspire to be.

This reflection takes some effort, yet 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?" Nor would they say "let's use this valuable time to keep hashing out that same problem in the same way." Coming to sessions prepared will help you to be more productive and give you much more bang for your buck.

Important Concepts for Couples Therapy and Relationships

The following ideas can help identify areas of focus or stimulate discussion between you and your partner between meetings. If you periodically review this list, you will discover that your reflections, thoughts and feelings 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 important.
- Identifying what to do and how to do it is often the easy part. The bigger challenge is identifying why you don't do it and what it will take to do what you want to do going forward.
- You and your partner are likely limited in being able to respond in the ways that you are asking of each other. Accepting this is a huge step into maturity. A big part of the work that is done in couples therapy is to push your developmental edges, which is quite challenging work. If it were easy, you would already be doing it.
- The definite possibility exists that you have some flawed assumptions about relationships. 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 you have for your partner.
- One of the hardest parts of couples therapy is accepting that you will need to improve your response to a problem (how you think about it, feel about it, what to do about it or how to react to 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 fundamentally change each other. Each person striving to be a more effective partner is the most efficient way to transform 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.
- All major goals have built in contradictions, for example, speak up or keep the peace.
- 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.
- Asking good questions--of yourself and your partner--helps you uncover causes beneath problems.
- In a strong disagreement, do you really believe your partner is entitled to their opinion or preference? Or do you believe your opinion or preference is more worthy of being honored?
- Under duress, do you have the courage and tenacity to seek to understand your partner's reality?
- Do you have 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? (hint, hint: 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?
- Can you legitimately expect your partner to treat you better than you treat him/her?
- If you want your partner to change, are there things you can do to make it easier? What can your partner do to make it easier for you to change?
- When a problem shows up, often our first response is to hone in on what our partner has done to create or contribute to it. A much more productive question is to ask oneself "How do I aspire to be in this situation?"

The Importance of Communication

Communication is the number one presenting problem in couples therapy. Good communication is much more difficult than most people want to believe. We are all responsible for how we express ourselves, no matter how others treat us. The most important qualities for effective communication are respect, openness, curiosity and persistence. Effective negotiation or problem solving is impossible without good communication.

Effective communication means you need to pay attention to:

- Managing unruly emotions, such as anger that is too intense.
- How are you expressing yourself? Are you communicating in a way that invites your partner to hear you? Or are you whining, blaming, vague, passive aggressive, etc.?
- How attuned are you to what your partner is not only saying, but what lies beneath their words; their feelings, fears, longings, etc.
- What is your body language?
- What is the agenda for the conversation?
- How have you invited your partner into the conversation? Are you ambushing them, or are you respectfully requesting a dialogue?
- Are you more intent on interrupting, correcting, butting in or “being right”?

Some Final Thoughts.

- 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 even with the best of intentions – it requires practice, practice and more practice. Practice the right things and you will get there.
 - Love is destroyed when self-interest dominates.
 - To get to the bottom of a problem often means you 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 get it, you will pay the price by becoming dull.
 - If neither of you ever rocks boat, you will end up with a dull relationship
 - Knowledge is not power. Only knowledge that is applied is power.
 - Most of the ineffective things we do in relationships fall into just a few categories: Blaming or attempts to dominate, disengagement/withdrawal, resentful compliance and 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 they aspire to be in that situation.
 - Effective change requires insight plus action. Insight without action is passivity. Action without insight is impulsive. Insight plus action leads to clarity and power.
 - If you want to create a win-win solution, you cannot hold a position that has caused your partner to lose in the past.
- 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.

