

Individual, Marriage, and Family Enrichment Associates

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Couples Counseling

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Entering couples counseling requires a commitment to work on your relationship and your self. It requires investments of time and effort. But, it is worth it. Through this commitment and effort you can:

- Become the person you want to be in your relationship.
- Match the love that you feel inside with your behaviors outside.
- Come to know, understand, and nurture that important person you have chosen to be with.
- Feel the love and support of your partner as they become the person they want to be and match their feelings and behaviors.

Most people enter couples counseling with a better idea of what they want their partner to change than what they would change in themselves. While more may be required of one partner, you can only change yourself. Therefore, I encourage each partner to take responsibility for themselves.

Goals

Usually there is a particular problem that brings couples to counseling. Sometimes there are a list of problems that need to be addressed. Couples wait an average of six years before consulting a counselor for help. Therefore, relationship patterns are often entrenched. So, while the first goal of couples counseling is to resolve the current crisis, there are often other issues to address.

The chief author of therapy goals is you and your partner. My role is to help you create and express a vision for your relationship and to help you plan and make the necessary changes to achieve that vision. There are also some basic factors I believe contribute to a healthy relationship:

- A commitment to growth and nurturing one another.
- An effective communication system.
- The ability to make creative use of conflict.
- A willingness to give and receive love and affection.

Please take some time to think about your goals in couples counseling. What do you want to get out of counseling? What would you like to see for yourself, your partner, and your relationship? What about for your family and your children? What changes are you willing to make?

Tasks

In counseling sessions we talk to each other and discuss issues. While the agenda is flexible, it is best to come to appointments prepared by having thought about items you would like to discuss. Some people find it helpful to keep notes throughout the week so they remember important topics they want to discuss. Besides talking with each other, we may also use structured exercises, homework, readings, and writing exercises. You may be asked to “try on” new behaviors or respond differently to your partner. Or, we may decide on specific behavioral strategies.

Some of these tasks feel risky. However, we progress at your pace. So, you don’t have to participate in anything for which you do not feel ready. Part of my job is to maintain a safe environment to try new things. This will allow you to be less defensive and more open with your partner.

Communication.

Moving from a stance of defensiveness to one of openness is important in couples counseling. This is the role of good communication. Couples often adopt communication patterns that are hurtful. Instead of leading to resolution of conflicts and building closeness, these patterns perpetuate misunderstanding and create hurt feelings. For example, feelings of not being listened to can lead to estrangement and negative feelings towards your partner. Likewise, behaviors such as name calling, sarcasm, and emotional or physical intimidation are especially harmful to relationships.

A result of better communication is you learn more about yourself, your partner, and your patterns of interaction. You can use this knowledge to break ineffective patterns and establish new ones. Part of this movement is achieved by adopting a stance with your partner of understanding and nurturing. Your role with your partner is to understand, encourage and support not to fix, change, and control.

Communication Example: Couples Dialogue

One exercise I often use in couples counseling is “couples dialogue”. Each person takes turns being the speaker while the other is the listener. The purpose is for each person in the couple to better understand the other. Many times when we speak to our partners we don’t listen and we don’t feel understood. The act of slowing down and understanding your partner is very helpful.

The role of the “speaker” is to bring up one issue/problem that they would like to discuss. The speaker talks about that issue while taking responsibility for their feelings. The listener responds with empathy by actively listening to the speaker, summarizing what the speaker says, and asking questions for clarification and understanding. When the speaker feels understood, the

roles are reversed. During this exercise there is no problem solving. Instead, it is a time to come to an understanding of the issue.

While easy to describe, this exercise can be difficult to learn. With conflict laden subjects, the tendency to revert to defenses postures, blaming, and stonewalling is great. Therefore, practicing this exercise with a counselor present helps improve communication at home.

Individual sessions

At times, I will meet separately with each partner. The reasons for this are twofold. First, there may be issues you do not feel initially comfortable talking about with your partner. Second, there may be important work that you need to do to improve your relationship that does not involve your partner. If you would like an individual session please let me know. In cases where I meet with one partner individually, I always offer to meet the other individually as well.

Some Basic Ground Rules

- Couples sessions start after both partners arrive.
- Allow others to speak by listening without interrupting.
- No name calling, put-downs, threats, or intimidation.
- Sessions, including individual sessions, are confidential.
- In instances where the emotional or physical safety of one or both partners or children is in question, that becomes the focus of our session. (see also informed consent form for duty to warn and mandated reporting policies)

Walk the talk

Trust is built through following through on what you say you will do. Therefore, it's better not to make promises you can't, or won't, fulfill. In couples counseling, translating talk and insight into action is very important. Trying new behaviors, forming new habits, and changing old beliefs takes practice and commitment. However, by concrete demonstrations of your commitment to changing, your partner will experience you in a new way. Through this process you can grow together and live the life you want.

Love

People enter committed relationships with people they love. Sometimes when there are problems in the relationship it is difficult to express love and appreciation for your partner. However, this expression is especially important when dealing with difficult issues and conflicts. A smile, a hug, a compliment, expressions of thanks or appreciation are all important on your journey together. Remember to give each other a break, to express your appreciation for one another, and to acknowledge the progress you are making.