

How to Get the Most from your Couples Therapy

For most couples, in my experience, the hardest part of couples therapy comes when they realize that they cannot make their partners change. Many couples come into therapy hoping that I will help them “fix” their spouse, and they show up at their first counseling session with a long laundry list of what they think is wrong with their partner and what their partner needs to change.

The problem with this approach is that it is blaming and shaming. Most people become defensive when faced with blame or shame and do what they can to build a strong case in their defense in order to avoid feeling shamed. This puts the attacker in the position of having to build a stronger and more righteous attack. The situation quickly escalates as each person builds a stronger case for why they are “right.” It is easy to see how quickly attacker and defender can find themselves fully caught up in the “Blame/Shame Cycle.”

‘Round and ‘round they go in the not so merry Blame/Shame Cycle. It is not an effective way to promote change and actually ensures the opposite—that problems remain very stuck.

While blaming a partner for the problems in the relationship is certainly very human and understandable, it is not empowering. It makes you exceedingly dependent on whether or not your partner chooses to listen and make the changes you seek.

The truth is that the best outcomes are reached in couples counseling when you have more goals for yourself than for your partner. The good news is that this also puts you in a more empowered position because change can start with you. You have the power to improve and change the way that you respond to the things your partner says and does. Becoming a more effective partner is the best way to improve a relationship. The irony is that usually when your partner sees that you are working to change your ineffective behaviors toward them, they become much more motivated to make the changes that you are requesting.

Successful couples therapy involves:

- ∞ Creating a vision about the kind of life you want to build together.
- ∞ Developing clarity about how you aspire to be in the relationship.
- ∞ Understanding the individual blocks that keep you from becoming the kind of partner you aspire to be.
- ∞ Collaborating to solve things as a team.
- ∞ Learning new ways to interact and communicate in therapy and then practicing them frequently at home.

There are a few common pitfalls that can occur during a couples therapy session. One typical but unhelpful pattern in couples therapy is to make the focus of the session

whatever happens to be the problem of the moment. This is a reactive and largely ineffective approach. Would you call an important meeting and then not have anything on the agenda to address?

A second habit to avoid is showing up without an intention for the session and saying, “I don’t know what I want to address, do you?” While spontaneity may open some interesting doors, it is largely a hit or miss approach.

Another typical but unproductive pattern is to spend the session time simply re-hashing your past and present fights. Discussing these arguments outside of the larger context of your relationship goals is often just hurtful and re-wounding.

Here are four suggestions for more powerful and effective ways to approach your couples therapy sessions:

- ∞ Think about the objectives you’d like to achieve in your session. Are they in alignment with your vision for the relationship?
- ∞ How can you show up as the partner you aspire to be? Remember: It’s not about changing your partner, it’s about improving your response to your partner.
- ∞ Ask yourself: “In order to improve my relationship, what would my contribution need to be?”
- ∞ Stay awake! It is easy to become unconscious and repeat old patterns that are emotionally reactive. Can you slow down, remain aware, and stay open to a different possibility?

This type of reflection and preparation is your key to a successful couples therapy experience.

In closing, I would like to emphasize not to wait until things are so bad you can barely stand each other! ***Don’t wait until the relationship is dying and then ask your therapist to save it.*** If you were in danger of having a heart attack, would you still eat poorly and avoid exercise? Take action now! Don’t let the Blame/Shame Cycle ruin your relationship. Address your heart irregularities as soon as they occur and you will have more chance of a happy heart and a satisfying relationship.

Adapted from “How To Get the Most From Your Couples Therapy” by Ellyn Bader, Ph.D. and Peter Pearson, Ph.D ~ www.CouplesInstitute.com

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