

How to Get the Most From Your Couples Therapy

by Peter Pearson, Ph.D.

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.

After 30 years of clinical experience and specializing in working with thousands of couples, I have arrived at some guidelines that can make our work more effective. First, I do have some expectations of you. I am not neutral. I have evolved principles and concepts that I believe give us the greatest chance for success.

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 have created this document to provide 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
- 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
- Time to review progress

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 be with family, time to play, coordinate, nurture, relax, hang out and plan. This time will encroach on some other valuable areas - your personal or professional time.

The second compromise is comfort. That means emotional comfort, like going out on a limb to try novel ways of thinking or doing things, listening and being curious instead of butting in, speaking up instead of becoming resentfully compliant or withdrawing. At the beginning, there will be emotional risk taking action, but you will never explore different worlds if you always keep sight of the shoreline. In addition, few people are emotionally comfortable being confronted with how they don't live their values or being confronted with the consequences of their actions.

The other comfort that will be challenged is energy comfort. It simply takes effort to sustain improvement over time: staying conscious of making a difference over time, remembering to be more respectful, more giving, more appreciative etc. It takes effort to remember and act.

The other effort is even more difficult for some people: that is improving their reaction to problems. For example, if one person is hypersensitive to criticism, and his/her partner is hypersensitive to feeling ignored, it will take effort to improve their sensitivity instead of hoping the partner will stop ignoring or criticizing.

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 a sustained improvement. It is like pairs figure skating - one person cannot do most of the work and still create an exceptional team.

How to Maximize the Value from your Couples Therapy Sessions

A common yet unproductive pattern in couple's therapy is making the focus be whatever problem happens to be on someone's mind at the moment. This is a reactive (and mostly ineffective) approach to working things through.

The second unproductive pattern is showing up and saying, "I don't know what to talk about, do you?" While this blank slate approach may open some interesting doors, it is a hit or miss process.

The third common unproductive pattern is discussing whatever fight you are now in or whatever fight you had since the last meeting. Discussing these fights/arguments without a larger context of what you wish to learn from the experience is often an exercise in spinning your wheels.

Over time, repeating these patterns will lead to the plaintive question, "Are we getting anywhere?"

A more 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.

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?" Your preparation will pay high dividends.

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.

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 that 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 and 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 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?"

The Importance of Communication

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

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.

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 - practice, practice and more practice. Practice the right things and you will get there.

Love is destroyed when self-interest dominates.

If you don't know what you feel in important areas of your relationship, it is like playing high stakes poker when you see only half your cards. You will make a lot of dumb plays.

The possibility exists that we choose partners we need but don't necessarily want.

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:

- 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.

Everything you do works for some part of you, even if other parts of you don't like it.

Three motivations will govern any sustained effort you make. You will seek to:

1. Avoid pain or discomfort
2. Create more benefits

3. Be a better person.

It's also true for your partner.

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.

Businesses and marriages fail for the same three reasons. A failure to:

- Learn from the past
- Adapt to changing conditions
- Predict probable future problems and take action.

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.

"To be a champ you have to believe in yourself when nobody else will."

Sugar Ray Robinson -Middleweight boxing champion, considered by many to be the best fighter in history, pound-for-pound.

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.

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Dr. Peter Pearson and his wife, Dr. Ellyn Bader, are founders and directors of The Couples Institute in Menlo Park, California. As therapists, workshop leaders, authors, and speakers, they are dedicated to helping couples create extraordinary relationships. They have been featured on over 50 radio and television programs including "The Today Show" and "CBS Early Morning News." For more information, visit www.CouplesInstitute.com.