

Marriage/Relationship Counseling is NOT the Beginning of the End

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His question over the phone to me was one I've heard several times before, and one I know other clients have wondered about. "How many couples who come to marriage counseling actually end up staying together?" Let me address this concern here.

New clients to marriage counseling often fear that counseling will eventually lead to a separation. With the exceptions of 1) domestic violence, 2) severe and chronic alcohol and substance abuse or 3) ongoing and flagrant infidelity, it is my opinion that couples owe it to themselves, each other and their children to work out their differences and try their hardest to stay together.

Aside from the above mentioned situations, couples often are able to improve their marriage by talking to an objective and experienced counselor. It is surprising the number of couples who come to my office and say they have discussed separation, but have not yet tried any counseling. Getting help from an objective neutral third party is a significant step towards gaining perspective about your relationship troubles.

One of the most important things individuals coming to marriage counseling need to be aware of, is that the counseling office is not a court room. As a therapist I sometimes get the impression that couples think they are coming to me as two attorney's coming before the bench for me to render a decision. I AM NOT A JUDGE who will pronounce one innocent and the other guilty. If counseling is going to be helpful both people need to accept responsibility for what they've been doing that hasn't been helpful. Moving from a position of "blame the other guy" to a position of "what can I do differently?" is a major step in the right direction.

But before entering counseling many couples have become polarized and are locked in a stand off in a test of wills. It's like they are saying to each other "you have to change first before I'll consider coming around to you." As a therapist I work to move each party off their stance and move towards the center. If instead of competing couples can learn to cooperate to meet each other's needs, relationships can undergo dramatic transformations, and the process does not have to take a long time.

Significant therapeutic growth for couples happens when they are challenged to realize that how they *think* about their situation greatly influences how they *feel* about their relationship and each other. This is where having someone outside of yourselves really helps you to become aware of how distorted thoughts can lead to undesirable feelings. As an example one of the most common complaints couples enter therapy with is that "we don't communicate." Think about that "we do not communicate." Is this true? Is it possible to *not* communicate? People can not say a word to each other and be communicating a great deal. After talking with couples for a few minutes I often find that they do communicate fairly well. What seems to be the problem is that they don't like WHAT is being communicated, as opposed to not communicating. This may seem like a minor difference of semantics, but it reflects a way of thinking about your marital problems which may result in you continuing to be stuck. At the beginning my goal is to help you become unstuck

Through changing the way we think about our circumstances we can change the way we feel and the way we behave. In therapy a good therapist will challenge you to grow and develop greater awareness of yourself. When couples do this together relationships become more

fulfilling and meaningful. But relationships aren't only transformed when couples come to counseling. If just one of the parties can gain greater awareness and change, the other party can't help but to be effected. Many relationships have been improved through just one person working with a counselor.

The bottom line is that marriage counseling in no way signals the end of the relationship. Like your car, sometimes our relationships simply need a tune up. Many couples find that after only a few sessions they are getting along better, working together and restoring the positive feelings they once had for each other. Marriage counseling is much more often an opportunity for a new beginning rather than the signal of an ending.