

## **HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM COUPLES THERAPY (FROM DR. PETER PEARSON)**

Couples are often uncertain what to expect from the process of couples therapy and are often anxious and hesitant about it. In order to decrease these feelings, they approach therapy with the notion that each person will describe their distress and somehow the therapist will assist them in relieving it and create happier relationships. They also expect to learn new and better skills but often hope their partner will do most of the learning in the issues they bring to therapy. These expectations are lacking and could be detrimental to the success of therapy if not addressed early. There are many elements to be understood in order to get the most out of couples' therapy.

### **The goals and objectives of Couples Therapy:**

The major goals and objectives of couples' 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 task of couples therapy is 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

### **What you will need to create sustained improvement in your relationship:**

- A vision of the life you want to build together
- To have an individual life separate from your partner
- A collaborative attitude and skills to work as a team
- The motivation to persist
- Time to review your progress

### **Tradeoff and tough choices:**

One tradeoff will be time: It takes time to create a relationship that can flourish. Time to be together, relax, coordinate, hang out, plan and play. This time could infringe on other valuable personal or professional time.

A second is comfort: This means emotional comfort like risking new ways of thinking and doing things, listening and being curious instead of butting in, and speaking up instead of becoming resentful, compliant or withdrawn. In addition, few people are emotionally comfortable with being confronted with how they don't live their values or being confronted with the consequences of their actions.

In addition, you might be challenged with the energy it takes to stay conscious of making a difference over time as it takes effort to remember and act.

Another effort is improving reactions 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 long term goals of creating a satisfying relationship. In an interdependent relationship, effort is required on the part of each person to make a sustained improvement.

### **How to maximize the value from 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 in the present. 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.

A 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.

An effective and more powerful approach to couple's 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 he/she has some flawed assumptions about yours. The problem is most of the time we don't want to believe these assumptions are flawed.

### **Focus on Yourself Rather than Your Partner**

Couples therapy works best if you have more goals for yourself than for your partner. Therapy works best when it helps you reach the objectives you set for yourself.

Problems occur when reality departs sharply from our expectations, hopes, desires and concerns. It's human nature to try to change one's partner instead of adjusting our expectations.

A challenging part of couples therapy is accepting that 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 improve.

You can't change your partner. Your partner can't change you. You can influence each other but this does not 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 things go well, and the sun is shining. But when it gets bone-chilling cold, you are hungry and tired, and your partner is whining about how you got them into this mess, that's when you get tested. Your leadership and character get tested. You can join the finger-pointed or become how you aspire to become.

Fear lets you know you are not prepared. If you view fear in that mode. It becomes a signal to prepare the best you can.

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 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 is 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- help 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)

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 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 belief and attitudes you have about the problem

No wonder good communication is so hard!

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 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:**

1. learn from the past
2. Adapt to changing conditions
3. Predict probable future problems and act

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.

**Some final thoughts...**

Trust is the foundational building block of a flourishing relationship; you create trust by doing what you say you will do.

Getting to the bottom of a problem often means you first accept how complex it is.

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.

You can't create a flourishing relationship by only fixing what 's wrong. But it is a start.

If you strive to always feel emotionally safe in your relationship and get it, you will pay the price by becoming dull.

Knowledge is not power. Only knowledge that is applied is power.

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 effort.