

# Get the Most Out of Couples Counseling

I remember my professor saying, “*People do not know how to be good clients. You have to teach them how to get the most out of the experience. Otherwise, you are wasting their time and it is not enjoyable. The goal of therapy is change.*”

Imagine reading this, in its entirety, after the first few sessions and ***asking yourself if you are getting the most out of counseling.***

## **Start Here- Take Responsibility**

Instead of saying what my partner is doing wrong, ***I own my part and start changing my parts of the equation. Not just that blaming is silly and ineffective, it is that I disempower myself unless I take full responsibility.***

For example- my ability to own my feelings. ***My feelings are my responsibility, my issue.*** You don't make me feel a certain way -because you don't have power over me like that.

“I made myself angry. The story I was telling myself about your behavior is that... And that is how I made myself angry.” Is how we take responsibility for our emotions.

## **Why Did I Wait So Long?**

Most couples, when asked, say that *they waited way too long* to go into couples counseling.

And now there's a lot that needs to be healed.

## **Future Oriented**

***Instead of re-litigating the past, I can talk about what I want in the future.***

“I would like our relationship to look like this in the future and here's what I'm willing to do to help it look that way.”

Go ahead and ask the question out loud, “What would it take for this to work?” The assumption in that is that it can work and we just haven't found out what it would take.

## **We Are In This Together**

We're not enemies, opponents, adversaries, we are partners together trying to solve a problem that we have.

Prepare for counseling, individually and with your partner.

Some people wait for the therapist to do all the work. The therapist can help you stay on track and on target and choose good paths, but *you need to do the groundwork*. If you have not prepared yourself for a counseling and then you show up and say, "You're the counselor, you tell me what we should work on," perhaps you're not helping the situation. The counselor is not God.

When I make a mistake, not "if," please let me know.  
If I have a misunderstanding about what you said, please let me know.  
If I made an assumption that is incorrect, please let me know.  
We are a team and partners in getting you through to the finish line.  
I need you to do your part and I will do my best to do my part.

### **Ups and Downs After Therapy**

There are times that you will be on fire after therapy.

You'll be so excited about a new epiphany, insight, perspective and you'll be excited.

There are other days that you'll leave therapy wondering why you spend money and where this person got their degree.

Remember that feelings come and go.

Remember that sometimes your feelings will bump you off your game and no matter what's happening, you won't like the outcome of that session.

Please consider the big picture and don't quit right away if you hit a bump in the road.

Likewise, don't quit if you feel immediately better. Remember that it's the long game.

I have had people expect to have radical transformation within three sessions. That's not a reasonable expectation.

You will have some changes within three sessions. If you don't have any change within three sessions, please fire me and get a new therapist.

But don't expect something radical to have changed within three sessions. It might, but that is not a guarantee or a reasonable expectation.

Make sure that you attend therapy.

Some people start off really gung-ho, and then they skip and they don't come back for six months.

We are taught to let you go and to allow you to have your free will, your autonomy. We can ask about you and see if you are okay and if we messed up.

If you need to be here, it's your responsibility to get here. And know that it's not gonna be one session or two sessions and you're completely changed.

Within 30 seconds or so, you know if you like someone.

That's true in the dating world; it's also true in counseling.

If you have an immediate aversion to your counselor, it's OK to get another counselor.

We actually have had that happen to us. It's OK to make sure that you were a good fit with your counselor.

If you don't feel comfortable with your counselor, you're not gonna open up and do the deeper work that's necessary.

### **Best Predictor of a Successful Outcome**

I have found that the best predictor of a successful outcome from therapy, wait for it... comes from doing work outside the office.

There are 24 hours in a day, 7 days in a week.

If you spend one hour every week in therapy, that means every other hour is outside of therapy.

Similar to exercise, if you just work out once a week, when you're with your trainer, instead of every day or multiple times a week, your progress will be slow.

*Please take the homework seriously and you'll see results.*

What work are you doing outside of the session in order to make the most of it?

Are you reading articles?

Getting more information?

Reading books or watching videos together that are related to your challenges?

Are you doing a meditation or yoga class?

Or are you going on dates?

What are you actually doing?

### **Be Open to Feedback**

Gottman calls defensiveness one of the four Horsemen.

I recently had a client tell me that he did not know what conversation I was listening to, but clearly he was listening to his wife. She was shaking her head no, that he was not listening.

It is OK to disagree with a therapist.

That's probably pretty normal.

Is there a way that you can be open to the feedback and even request feedback, leaving your ego at the door and lowering your walls? I would ask the same of the therapist.

### **You statements versus I statements**

*When I talk, do I tell about what's happening with me?*

Do I talk about my thoughts, my feelings, my dreams hopes and aspirations or ***am I reading my partners mind and telling them what they were thinking, with their motivations are***, what they're assuming?

***Most people do better when they talk about themselves and their partner does the same.***

### **Feelings**

***Do you know that your feelings, your triggers, your wounds are your responsibility?*** If you know that, that is helpful.

Do you know that you have to *sit with your feelings* and allow the feelings to just be there without stirring them, *without avoiding them*, and then they go away on their own?

***If you're able to sit with your feelings on a regular basis, your counseling will go much faster and be more successful.***

Are you able to identify your feelings?

For example, I had someone say that they felt "bad."

Well, that's technically accurate, "bad" is not a feeling, it is a category of feelings. If you could say instead, when you said that, "I felt guilty."

That level of verbal precision is helpful and that level of self-awareness will help you, as well.

## **Vulnerable- Express rather than spew**

Can you be vulnerable, and express your feelings- *rather than spew them*, when things get difficult?

If you can be vulnerable and let down your walls, *counseling goes significantly faster*. If you have to practice that in counseling, it slows down the progress. Practice checking your ego at the door, wherever you go. Practice letting down your walls all week. When you get to counseling, you will be ready!

*Lean into the discomfort of therapy.*

Dealing with feelings, making changes, doing things that are uncomfortable often cause stress. If you can lean into distress, if you can tolerate distress, ***if you can allow yourself to be uncomfortable, the rate of your change and the rates of your growth will be much faster.***

Be rigorously honest with yourself and your partner.

If you have an anger problem, drug problem, laziness problem, problem with alcohol or other things like that, *if you can be honest about those- you will progress much faster.*

Imagine coming into counseling and your spouse telling you that you have a problem with alcohol. Imagine saying, "OK I'll give it up for six months and let's see what changes we can make during those six months."

You both try your best and you make significant changes in those six months. Was that worth the investment? Was it worth maybe looking more deeply into the root causes?

## **Needs**

What needs do you have right now in counseling in this exact moment?

What needs do you have in the relationship?

What needs do people have in general?

*If you know what you need, what type of relationship you need and want, it really helps.*

For example, there are many people that read "The Five Languages of Love" book. The book might be a little oversimplified at times, but the idea is knowing what it is that you need in order to feel loved is a very helpful thing to tell your partner.

Rather than read one another's mind, if you come in and ask for your needs to be met, most partners will help.

## **Honest and Open**

Am I being the best partner that I can be?

What do I need in order to be a better partner?

Do I care about being a better partner?

How am I blocking love and communication in this relationship?

Does your pain matter to me?

Can I rely on you?

Can you rely on me?

I have had a few clients say to their partner, "I am right; you were wrong 100% of the time. I am never wrong."

For real, there are people who say that to their partner. Don't let that be you.

## **Feedback**

I am big on feedback loops.

What is going well?

What is not going well?

Ask this every single week in your relationship. Ask this about counseling with your partner. Talk about this in counseling with your therapist. *You can consistently change and adapt and tailor it so that it meets your needs.*

It means that you have to be fairly self-aware and more conscious than most people are.

Can you imagine asking for what you need, and having your need be met?

Imagine the counselor fighting with the clients or the client fighting with the counselor. If it's good-hearted disagreement or arguing, that's one thing- but I have witnessed both sides of that. It's not fun either way and it usually impedes progress. If all you're doing is showing up and getting in the way, it's not going to work.

## **Set and Measure Goals**

We all want to meet our goals. That means you have to know what your goal is and you have to have a path to get there.

For example, if I want six pack abs, and what I am doing is walking around the block once a week, I will probably not reach my goal.

If I want six pack abs and I'm doing five sit ups a day, I am doing the right activity, just not enough.

Are you doing the right activity and enough of the right activity, consistently enough and hard enough to get to where you want to go?

What do you need to change in order to get to where you want to go?

Are you focused on skills or content?

Does your problem resemble the whack-a-mole game? Every week you come in and say, "Hey, fix this problem for us." If you do that, that's a very inefficient use of time. Instead, *learn the tool* so that you can take care of the moles yourself.

***If you can learn good skills and hold them and polish them in therapy, you no longer need a therapist. That's the goal*** and that will get you towards behavioral change much faster.

If you can comprehend and follow the guidance, you will do much better in counseling.

Thank you for having the courage to go into counseling. It is not always an easy process. I appreciate the bravery. Are you already in therapy or are you window shopping? Some people procrastinate by reading "just one more article." Honestly, you already know what you need to do. Are you doing it? It feels better inside when you do. Give us a call 585.544.5342- let's get those results. Let's stack the deck in your favor.