

Couples questions before coming to counseling (or very early on in counseling to get to know one another again, like you used to know one another)

One of the goals of counseling, especially couples counseling, is to own your side of the equation. No blaming or justifying or defending, just owning your own issues. Yes, get individual counseling to improve yourself. Yes, look at your skeletons or demons and get yourself into the best condition, the best version of yourself.

Now, get to know your partner and keep updating the information on your partner. Get to know their hopes, dreams, aspirations, fears, past hurts etc.

In order to know what is your issue versus the issue of your partner, you need to know yourself, and to know your partner.

We sometimes think that we do not have to do the work to get to know them, because we have been together for awhile. We often overestimate how well we know our partner and then we do not do the maintenance work of updating the information. Did you know someone's favorite color or flower can change?

What's the stuff that I need to improve, what's the stuff that my partner needs to improve?

If you can be more aware of what's going on in your relationship, that generally helps people. It helps avoid the blame. It helps to take responsibility. It also helps to unearth some of the archaeological finds. Or you can trip over them and be unconscious about them. We could all be more self-aware and look at what's happening in our relationship.

Remember the past

We each experience life differently. You think you went on a walk around the block together. Nope, you did it simultaneously, each experiencing something altogether different. "It was a shared experience," is commonly said and so the false assumption is that you experienced it the same way. You did not. You therefore will not remember it the same way, either. One person is not wrong or lying because they remember it differently. Own your words, "I remember that differently." That is verbally precise, accurate, non-accusatory and you are telling your partner about you. "That is not what happened," is a phrase that will start a fight. Try softened start up instead. Gottman has a lot to say about softened startup. If you are not sure how to do that, let me know and I can coach you through that.

Take an hour or so to look at the pictures you have together. Are they in the albums, on your phone, on some memory device? What happens when you look through all those pictures? What feelings arise in you? What stories do you remember? By the way, I am

not a college professor, expecting you to write down your answers and submit them to me for judgment. My expectation is that you do the assignment. Skip too many assignments and you will find that your therapy is less effective and that is your prerogative. Do the assignment, talk about the answers to the questions with your partner and really do it with good intention, in good faith and you will come away knowing your partner much better than when you started. I highly recommend that, if you value your family and your relationship.

Look at the shared memories that you have together. Can you construct a timeline from when you met until today?

All the memories high and low, the benchmarks, milestones, trips, vacations, illnesses, get togethers etc.

Look at that timeline together as a couple.

Look for patterns that you see and see if your partner sees patterns that you do not see.

Differences are so good

Learn from each other. That's what we do with differences, when we have a difference with our partner, we learn from that difference. Validation is the skill that we use when we encounter differences. "I get where you are coming from," is the statement. No judging, not calling names or implying you are less than me because there is this difference. No implying that my way is the best or only way and that you do it wrong. Like a stylistic difference, you simply prefer your way and I prefer mine. No converting or persuading the person to change their ways to your way, just listening to understand. That is the goal. Why are we so attracted to people who do things differently? Imagine a healthy couple and they stumble over a difference. They respect one another and are considerate. "OOH, you do that differently than I do. Hmmmm Why do you do it that way?" "Oh my goodness, I like the way you do it better than the way I have been doing it. I can learn a lot from you." Put in evolutionary terms, the person with the largest behavioral repertoire, has the greatest chance to survive. Are you someone who values getting results? When you run into a wall, you learn to do it differently, right? That is what your partner is helping you do. See it differently, learn ways to do it differently. Grow and develop...

Intimacy

Let's look at your foundation of friendship, how you bid for connection, your languages of love. Why? Do you want to let your partner get to know you? Do you want to know your partner? If you do not, then you do not want "intimacy." Intimacy means I allow you to get to know me and I want to get to know you. The depth is negotiable. Some people like to stay more on the surface and others want to dig in or go deep. This is a preference that sometimes reveals incompatibility. If one person never wants to go deep and the other lives in the depths and cannot be in relationship with someone unwilling or unable to go deep, then you have to either deal with it or negotiate or end the relationship. Are there other satisfactory options? People have the right to free will.

Even if they are pathological or dysfunctional. But especially if they simply have a different preference, we allow them to be different, if we are healthy people.

Getting to know you

As you become more aware of those things, it becomes easier to help you. As awareness grows, you're able to ask for your needs to better be met. If you do not know what your needs are, it is patently unfair for you to expect me to know your needs. I cannot know your needs before you do. I am not Disney!! Ask for your needs to be met, make sure I understand what you are asking and we can best negotiate how to meet those needs. This time, I might be able to meet them. Next time, I may not be able or perhaps not willing. It might be an unfair thing to ask or I might be overwhelmed or simply unable. That is why they estimate roughly 95% of your needs you will meet yourself (or outside of the relationship). The remaining 5% must be met inside the relationship. If your needs are not being met and they are your responsibility, blaming your partner sounds silly, doesn't it. If the partner cannot or will not help you meet the remaining 5%, then you at least have 95% of your needs met, so you are not desperate. If they truly will not meet those remaining needs, you have some difficult conversations ahead.

How do you know how to do relationships? Who taught you? Who is your role model for being a good partner in a romantic relationship? You probably did not take romantic relationship classes. Just a hunch...

I would ask you to consider some sort of artistic expression. Look at your mother and your father. Your biological parents. Maybe your adoptive parents, or a stepparent. Who were the benchmarks, the models for how to do a relationship? Do you have a picture in your head or was it from poetry or literature that you learned how to be romantic?

Noticed that I didn't ask "healthy relationship," just relationship. We tend to follow someone's model, not do what they ask us to do. Just like your children will do what you do, not do what you say. You are currently modeling a relationship for your kids. Do you want them to do exactly what you do in a romantic relationship?

What do you want to model for your kids? How do you get to the point that you are proud of the modeling you are doing for your kids.

Quick archaeological dig:

Let's have partner one go first on this (which one of you is partner one?)

Ask partner one these questions:

Do you remember the first time that we met?

Tell me about it what was it about your partner that made them stand out?

What were your first impressions?

Now the other partner- ask those same questions

No need to write down answers, just talk about it. This part can take an hour of reminiscing and commiserating and story telling. You determine how long you want to spend and really delight in one another.

Ask Partner one (then ask partner two, switch after every question if you want to have wonderful back and forth)

Before you got married, you know, the time that you were dating and were committed to each other, what do you remember?

What stands out?

How long did you know each other before you committed?

If you chose to not get married, who set the tone and how did you come to that conclusion, as a team, as partners?

What else do you remember of this time in your life, as a couple?

What were some of the highlights?

What types of things did you do together?

How did you decide to get married, or commit to each other?

Of all the people in the world, what led you to decide that this was the person you wanted to be with?

Was it an easy decision?

Was it a difficult decision?

Were you ever in love? Talk about being in love.

Do you remember your wedding or commitment ceremony? Tell me about it

Did you have a honeymoon? What do you remember about that?

When you think back to the first year that you were married or living together, what do you remember?

Were there any adjustments to being married or living together?

What about the transition to becoming parents?

Tell me about this period of your relationship. What was it like for the two of you?

Looking back over the years, what moments stand out as really good times in your relationship?

What were the really happy times?

What's a good time for you as a couple? Has this changed over the years?

Many of the couples we've talked to say that the relationship has gone through periods of ups and downs.

Would you say that this is true of your relationship? Say more about that

What moments stand out as the really hard times in your relationship?

Why do you think you stayed together?

How did you get through these difficult times?

What is your philosophy about how to get through difficult times?

How would you say your relationship is different from when you first got married?

I'm interested in your ideas about what makes a relationship work. Tell me about why you think some relationships work while others don't. Think of a couple that you know that has a particularly good relationship and one that you know has a particularly bad relationship. What is different about these two relationships? How would you compare your own relationship to each of these couples?

Tell me about the relationships that your parents had. Each of you has a different answer for this. What was the relationship like partner one?

Would you say it's very similar or different from your own relationship partner one?

Make sure partner two can answer the same questions.

If you want to be artistic, here's a chance:

Make a map of the history of your relationship the major turning points, ups and downs.

What were the happiest times?

What are the happiest times for you- partner one?

For you- partner two?

How has your relationship changed over the years?

Tell me what you currently know about your partners major worries, stresses, hopes and aspirations. This is a long question or discussion- allow some time to explore it and connect on a deep level.

Rituals of connection

People tend to appreciate sameness, homeostasis. If you can guarantee me time each day and each week to connect, it is reassuring to me. Otherwise, I will come off as needy because I will keep asking for time to connect. Same is true for sexual intimacy. If the partners know when it will happen, and, while not “guaranteed” , can predict it, they ask less frequently. If they don't know it is a sure thing, they will ask and ask, not wanting to miss out. When they stop asking, that is when we see the relationship is in danger.

How do you stay in touch with one another on a daily basis? During work, off work hours- what is different?

What are your routines for staying in emotional contact?

Differences

Differences are there to help you grow and develop and learn new ways to be a person. Differences, when celebrated, help us get to know each other and bond us together. They push us out of this terrible thing we call a comfort zone, which is devoid of all the richness associated with growing as a person. The goal in life, if you are a psychologically healthy person, is not “to be comfortable.”

Tell me about the differences you have that create conflict.

Is one person more neat and organized than the other?

Is one person more emotionally expressive than the other?

Does one person value exploring emotions more than the other?

Does one person want more time alone than the other?

Does one person want more sex than the other?

Does one person see intimacy as a precondition to making love?

Is one person more financially conservative than the other?

*(After each question, you could ask, “What does that mean to each of you and how does that play out?”)

Is one person more independent from their family than the other?

Does one person want more closeness?

Is one person more likely to openly discuss conflicts?

Does one person want an equal division of labor while the other doesn't care?

Is one person more involved with the children than the other?

Is one person stricter with the children in the other?

Does one person want more gentleness and understanding with the children than the other?

Is one person habitually late, and to the other it is important to be on time?

Does one person prefer active physical recreation, while the other is more passive and sedentary?

How do you make sure that each of you get your individual needs met while ensuring that the needs of the family get met and the needs of the couple are not neglected?

Many couples forget that they are a couple, then they have kids. They absolutely neglect the needs they have as a couple and they move quickly towards divorce as a result. Divorce is very predictable for couples who do that.

Video of your argument

Have you ever seen yourself on video? Your voice sounds different to you than to others, you might even look different and the lighting might affect how you see yourself. When you see yourself act a certain way during an argument, and the feelings have already passed, you might re-perceive the fight differently. This is one reason why we seem to heal with the passage of time (and good behavior)- we look at the exact situation differently, from a distance and with more wisdom than we had in the moment of the argument. Healing a trauma is ongoing, not a one time event. If something traumatic happened, keep going through the healing process until you are not set off by triggers.

How I do emotions

How we do emotions as a team, as a partnership

Do you feel flooded by the way that your partner complains to you? Do you find yourself having an innocent victim or righteous indignation perception? I am innocent. I did nothing wrong. You wronged me and I was a victim. So very unattractive, isn't it? If you are doing that, stop immediately. Ugh, not a good strategy. If your partner is doing it, know that it is nearly impossible to convince them that they had a role in their own suffering. I would recommend that, with the space you have now, you heal that and recognize what is in your control and what is not. When you are together again, it will be tempting to school them on righteous indignation and being a victim. Is that a good use of your time? Will you be effective?

Is this the right time?

When should we not come for couples counseling or marital therapy?

Some people prefer to not have marital therapy while there's an extra marital affair whether it's a secret or revealed.

Some people prefer not to have marital therapy when there's ongoing physical abuse.

How do you feel about both of those?

Affection

When you sit down on the couch together do you make eye contact and look at one another?

Do you touch?

Do you finish each other sentences?
Are you stroking and caressing the other person?
Are you in survival mode and it is “every person for themselves”?

Flooding

What makes you feel emotionally overwhelmed or flooded?

Can you answer that question without blaming your partner?

I am responsible for my own triggers, my own feelings, the wounds that I carry from childhood. It is my job to heal them by feeling them. If I am triggered, I do not blame the other person. By definition, a trigger is mine to heal. It reveals a wound that may have been hidden or unrecognized. When I have a trigger, it is a message telling me that my wound has not completely healed. If I am uncertain how to heal a trigger, I will go to counseling and work with it there.

Complaining

Sometimes a complaint is a need that is not well-communicated. Sometimes it is a criticism. Please do not make the person guess what you really mean. This seems like a time to be direct and specific. When the person has to guess, it means they are likely to misunderstand or tell a story in their head that is not accurate. We have seen this go into flooding more often than not. How you complain, or start the conversation, might be ineffective.

Men and women seem to have a difference on this one. More accurately, people who communicate in a more stereotypical masculine manner tend to do it differently than their feminine counterparts. These two styles clash, unless they have talked through how they like to communicate and have agreed upon their rules of engagement. Imagine your partner complains every single time you start a conversation. If you are literal, you may think to yourself, “Their life really stinks. Why are they not doing something to change it if all they do is complain? They are starting to sound like a victim to me and that is definitely not attractive to me.” If your partner is interpreting your complaining in that manner, each time you try to engage with this strategy of complaining, you are driving that partner further away. What might be a more productive way of engaging in conversation with that person? Talk about what each of you prefers with starting the process of the conversation and then, if there is complaining, what do you prefer in their response instead? Keep negotiating until it is a win-win.

Self awareness (if you want more on this issue, I recommend “Talking 9 to 5” by Deb Tannen PhD)

Flooding happens when someone feels overwhelmed, stressed, triggered etc. If they are flooded enough, their neo cortex shuts down and all they have left is their reptile brain. That means they cannot really think well and process information and cannot do feelings. Take a break of at least three hours when one of you is struggling with flooding during a conversation. Or take your pulse and see if it is over 100. If over 100, for either person, reschedule the conversation for tomorrow. You’re unlikely to be successful until that is well below 100.

How do I typically bring up issues or complaints?

Do I tend to store things up?

Is there anything I can do that suits you?

Is there anything I can do that suits me?

What signals can we develop for letting the other person know when one person feels flooded and we need to take a break? Imagine being self-aware enough that you can take a break before you are incapacitated by the flooding. You catch it in time and then make it better!

How do you want to set up taking a 20-minute break?

During that break, no righteous indignation thoughts- and when you feel like you're an innocent victim, you're going to maintain distress instead of break the physiological stress. If you find you are doing that, victimizing yourself with the story you are telling in your own head, interrupt your own pattern. Stop doing that, because it is destructive and harmful to the relationship. Oh, and it is rarely accurate, so we prefer that you be reality based.

Types of problems- unable to be resolved, able to be resolved

Let's see how good we are at accepting what you cannot change is this one of our not resolvable problems?

What adaptation have I already made in our relationship?

What have you already done to adapt to me?

How have we already adjusted to the differences in our personalities?

Are there parts of our personalities that are not ideal but we've already made adjustments?

Are one person's feelings more important on this issue? For example, this issue may be more important to one person than the other.

Is it possible to have some type of trade-off across issues, for example with one person winning on this issue and another person winning on another issue of importance to them?

Can we do more to further adapt to this?

Can we minimize the importance of the issue, emphasize common ground, laugh about this, and except one another's foibles?

Is it OK for this problem to never be fully resolved? This might be an agree to disagree. If it is a dealbreaker, that is a different category and you cannot agree to disagree.

How did you learn to deal with feelings?

Consider this option for a moment. People talk about writing their memoir. Letting their family know about them in book form. Imagine answering these questions on video and your family learning about you this way. It is a structured set of questions that allow your people to get to know you on a deeper level.

Want to learn a lot about your partner? This gets deep quickly for most couples. Ask partner one all these questions, then ask partner two the same exact questions.
Tell me about the expression of anger and sadness in your family growing up.
Tell me how you expressed fear or guilt.
How has growing up affected how you look at these feelings today?

Style Preference

Do you prefer the conflict avoider style- that prefers little disagreement?
Do you like the volatile style which enjoys a good debate an argument?
Do you like the validating style which values togetherness above all things in the relationship?
Talk to your partner about styles and preferences so they do not take things personally that are not personal.

“Meta emotional” means, “how do I feel about feelings?” You can have a severe mismatch, based on your background. If one of you values the healthy expression of emotions and the other avoids expressing emotion, imagine the built-in conflict.

How do you feel about anger?
Do you think the expression of anger is healthy and natural, do you think it's dangerous and something to protect your relationship from?
How did your parents express anger?
How did you react to your questions anger how did they react to your anger when you were little?
How has that affected you?
How do you feel about sadness?
Do you think the expression of sadness is OK and natural?
Do you think it's potentially giving into depression and a negative view of life?
Do you think it's dangerous and something to protect your relationship from?
How did your parents express their sadness?
Could you tell if they were sad?
How did they react to your sadness when you were little?
How has that affected you?

What has been your own experience with fear and conquering fears?
Do you have any fears now, and, if so, how do you think it is best to cope with these fears?
Could you tell if your parents were worried or afraid?
How did your parents deal with your fears when you were little?
How has that affected you?

(Note: The questions in this entire document are borrowed from Gottman. I have the rights, having taking his training, and I reorganized the order and how they flow, but the questions are the intellectual property of Gottman Institute. I don't want to take credit where credit is not due.)

Life Goals, Dreams, Aspirations

Want to have a deeper relationship? Ask these questions, be intellectually curious about the answers and ask follow up questions. Allow yourself to be known when you are answering these and get to know your partner when you are asking these.

What would you say your life goals are for yourself?

If you were to look back on your life in a very old age, what would you like to be able to say about your life?

What accomplishments would please you?

What are some of your very personal goals, unrelated to your relationship?

What are your goals for others were important to you your children, spouse, kin, friends, community?

What would you like to see happen for them and what role do you think you play in making these things happen?

What are your financial goals?

What are financial disaster scenarios you want to avoid?

What are your hopes and aspirations, as individuals and together, for your children, for your life in general, for your old age?

What are your life dreams?

Some couples tell me that they are not compatible because some of the life dreams are different. We joke about marrying a clone and how boring that would be. We then work together, as a team, to determine what goals we need to do ourselves and which ones we must do as a couple.

Why do you have these goals and where do they come from in your lives?

Did your parents have similar or different goals what would you say is your life mission?

What do you hope to accomplish in your lives?

What is really important to you?

What is your common ground?

What discrepancies between the two of you exist in this area?

How satisfied are you with this area of your life?

To what extent do you feel that you're actually accomplishing important goals in your lives?

Meaning

Sometimes couples do better when they understand the meaning behind a word or concept. It might mean something completely different to you than it does to your partner.

What does a home mean to you?

What have you tried to create in your home together?

What does love mean to you?

How is this manifested in your lives?

What does being a provider mean to you?

What is the meaning of peacefulness?

What is the meaning of family?

What is the meaning of being married or being in a committed relationship?

What does money mean to you?

How is it evident in your life?
What does education mean to you?
What do fun and play mean to you?
What role should they have in a person's life?
What is the meaning, to you, of trust?
To you, what are the meanings of freedom, autonomy, independence, and power?
What is the meaning of being interdependent, of being we?
What is the meaning of having possessions: of owning things such as cars, nice clothes, books, music, a house, and land?
What is the meaning of nature to you, to your relationship, to the seasons?
What do you reminisce about?
What does it mean to be a member of your family?
Are there stories that you can tell me to go along with what it means to be one of your ancestors?
How do you think of yourself in this role of partner?
What is important to you?
What are you trying to accomplish in this role as partner?
What kinds of events go along with being a good partner that would help me understand how you see this role?
Tell me about the role of your life work or occupation and what it means to you.
What is your life mission in your work?
How do you balance work in the other roles mother father son, daughter, brother, sister, friend with your role as partner?
What limits do you set on each of these roles and why?
What about other roles you play such as provider, protector, nurturer, educator, mentor, friend, religious and philosophical person?
Are any of these roles important to you?
How do you see yourself?
Tell me about family dinner time and your home.
What does eating together mean to you?
What are family meals like?
What were they like grown-up for each of you?
What about special meals? Thanksgiving, Christmas, Passover, Easter?
What did these events mean to you if anything?
What is the role of food in your family?
At the end of the day when people get home what is that reunion like? What goes on?
What is important when you all get together at the end of the day?
Tell me about TV.
Tell me about bedtime in your home.
Tell me about the weekends.
What goes on during weekends?
Tell me about entertaining in your home, having friends over, parties and so on. What typically goes on?
What is important to you about these events?
What atmosphere are you trying to create?
What are especially good times for you as a couple and for your family together?

Give some recent examples. What was important to you about these times?
What are typical things you celebrate? Birthday? Anniversaries? Family reunion?
Special holidays?
How do you celebrate them? What do these events mean to you?

What are typical things that happen around someone in the family being sick?
What did these things mean to you?
Tell me about vacations and travel in your life. What are these events like typically and what do they mean to you?
Tell me other things like fun and playtime?
Dates together?
Time with friends?
Holiday sports events, movies, TV viewing, religious and holiday?

How do you run errands?
Do you do errands together on Saturdays or Sundays, or do you split up? What is this time like?
How do you get renewed and refreshed when you're burned out and fatigued?
Can you share with me what your own views are about a spiritual life?
How have you created or tried to create shared meaning in this area of your lives?
What is the meaning of such things as peace, commitment, solidarity, charity, community?
What is your common ground?
What discrepancies between you exist in these areas?
How satisfied are you with these areas of your life?

What was your experience with affection and demonstrations of love when you were growing up?
When would you feel affectionate?
What would you do when you were affectionate?
How did your spirits respond to you when you were affectionate?
What did your father do when he was affectionate?
How did you know he was feeling affectionate?
What did your mother do when she was affectionate?
How did you know she was feeling affectionate?
How did your parents respond to each other's affection and expressions of love?
How are your brothers or sisters affectionate?
How did they express affection? How did your parents let you know they loved you?
Can you think of a time when they let you know they loved you?
What is it like for you to be affectionate and express your love now?
When do you feel affectionate now?
What do you do when you were affectionate?

In general, what are your thoughts and feelings about affection?
What would you look like, what would I see if I saw you affectionate or loving?

Could I tell if you were feeling affectionate or loving?

You'll probably answer these differently so one is partner one and one of you is partner two

Tell me about how you express warmth and humor and your positive affect.
How do you emphasize good times over bad? How often do you compliment your spouse?

How often are you proud of spouse?

How do you express your anger and contempt?

What was your first impression of your partner?

How often do you express your cynical, sarcastic, critical, disapproving side?

How often do you demonstrate emphasizing good communication of you as a couple?

How often do you emphasize unity and togetherness?

How often do you emphasize that we have the same beliefs, values, goals?

Do you describe your memories vividly and distinctly?

Are you able to self-disclose?

Are you able to talk about the struggles that your relationship has had to survive?

Are you able to talk about the major unpleasant life circumstances that you've had?

Do you glorify the struggle and emphasize commitment?

When you talk about surviving the difficult times in your relationship do you glorify the struggle?

Are you proud of your relationship?

How do you express the disappointment or disillusionment in your relationship?

When you think about the relationship not being what you thought it would be, how do you express that?

Do you have depressed thoughts, hopeless thoughts, or feel bitter about the relationship?

One of the goals that we assume couples have when they come in is that they will create constructive ways of managing conflict they create intimacy and understanding from conflict.

We assume that you want to understand your partners point of view. We assume that you want to down-regulate emotion during a conflict.

When there's an "agree to disagree" or a perpetual issue we assume that you want to be able to dialogue instead of being in gridlock about it.

We assume that you want to develop the six skills that are constructive conflict management skills.

For example, we assume that you prefer softened start up, you want your partner to accept your influence, you want to make an effective repair during the conflict, you want to deescalate, you want to compromise- when compromising is the appropriate goal. You want soothing and reassurance for yourself and for the other person.

We assume that in every conflict there's a conversation that you needed to have, but the fight incurred instead of this conversation. This conversation creates the bridge between conflict and intimacy.

We assume that you want to turn toward one another and make bids for emotional connection to build your emotional bank account. We assume that you want to get to know each other more and to build a culture of fondness and admiration within your friendship.

We assume that when you reach out, and you don't connect, that you want to learn how to heal those injuries of attachment and want to feel emotionally safe with each other.

Again we assume that you want to have less stress in the relationship and learn how to deal with that.

We make some assumptions that you want to be more affectionate and learn how to do that. How to be more romantic and passionate and have better sex. We assume that you want to be more adventurous, playful, have more fun and have more humor with each other.

We assume that you want to be intentional and build a shared meaning system sharing goals, mission, symbols your culture and talking about the legacy you want to leave. If we're incorrect in those assumptions, please let us know.