

Choosing a Couples Counselor

The process is remarkably similar to choosing a doctor. There are some things you must have and some intangibles.

Bedside manner- Is the counselor able to reach you, hold space, truly listen and challenge you in an objective manner? Does your personality fit with theirs? If you do not fit well, research has shown that you will get less out of it. You will need someone who is able and willing to confront logical fallacies, myths about relationships, thinking that is off-base. You probably have a preference for how they confront you, which style they use. Do you want someone who is in your face or someone who holds you accountable and models softened startup?

Is your counselor able to engage both partners? Many men absolutely hate counseling and say their partner “dragged them in.” Does your counselor bend over backwards to design the process so the man feels comfortable as well as the woman feeling comfortable (for heterosexual couples)? If either party drops out, it is no longer couples counseling. Are they up to date on the gender differences in communication, enough that they can point it out to you and help you navigate it?

If you do not see change within 3-6 sessions, get a new counselor.

Competent (You need basic competency. Most counselors who work with couples, well, they have not been trained to work with couples. They have experimented with it and are not basing it on research or evidence. They don't know if they are getting good results and do not have a system. You may inadvertently benefit, or you may be harmed, by such an approach.

Is your counselor competent and confident enough to not take you if you are a bad fit? Will your counselor ask you to take a break from counseling if you show that you are not ready, for example, never do your homework?)

Highly Competent (If your situation is a little complicated- parenting issues, affair, trauma, domestic violence, substance abuse etc., you will need someone with a large knowledge base, who can laser focus on your particular situation. Usually, couples have waited too long to get in to counseling and they need the counselor to hit the ground running. They need stabilization, support and a few basic skills to start. They may not want homework, but they know they need homework. Is your counselor organized enough to give homework?)

Competence and knowledge tend to go together. Does your counselor get regular training from the absolute best in the field, the gurus? Does your counselor read the best research, look at the studies and evidence and make sure that what he/she is doing actually works?

Does your counselor get the best out of you because they take the time to get to know you or do they have a cookie cutter approach? Do they have a wide repertoire, a big menu of options to use with you or is it one size fits all?)

Experienced (if they are not competent, experience is multiple repetitions of bad practice)

Highly Experienced (the longer someone does a certain profession, the more likely they have established mastery. They pick up patterns easily and are not learning on the job. Are they now working on depth or breadth or are they stale? Are they continuing to update their knowledge and skills? “Every counselor needs a counselor” was drilled into us in school. Is your counselor keeping up to date with their own issues?)

Ethics (Does your counselor engage in insurance fraud? Do they know that they are expressly prohibited from telling you to break up? Do they care that they are breaking the law or breaking ethics? Do they protect your confidentiality with hipaa compliance?)

Get in Quickly (How long does it take to get a reply from the counselor or their staff? Can you get in when you need to get in or at least reach them?)

Frequency of sessions (is your counselor confident enough to let you try out your new skills, practice them and then come back or do they want you coming every week for the next year? Does your counselor push you to grow and lean into the discomfort, being there to support you? Does your counselor regularly ask you if this is working for you and if you are getting your money’s worth? Can they take feedback?)