

# Choosing a Couples Counselor

The process is remarkably similar to choosing a doctor. There are some things you must have and some intangibles. *In the end, the goodness of fit is the most important factor.*

## Bedside manner

Is the counselor able to reach you, hold space, truly listen and gently challenge you in an objective manner? If not, you are less likely to get results, which is the whole purpose of coming.

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. When an individual comes for couples counseling, the likelihood of divorce increases. You need both people to feel accepted and not judged, no ganging up.

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?

Will your counselor ask you to meet weekly, despite the research about that?

## Highly Competent

You don't want a counselor that you have to train. The stakes are too high for that.

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. Have they seen a couple like you before? Do they have successful experience with it?

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? I want someone who takes it seriously, so they can get the best.

Or do they read the self-help books that have some interesting perspectives, without any scientific backing? Those are interesting, but not effective. **Most couples want results.**

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? (Everyone comes weekly.)

## Experienced

If they are not competent, experience is multiple repetitions of bad practice.

*You want someone who studies what they do so that they are constantly improving, measuring results to see if what they are doing works.*

## Highly Experienced

The longer someone does a certain profession, the more likely they have established mastery- if they self-reflect. If they ask their clients what worked. If they measure what they are doing and hold themselves accountable.

How many hours of good practice does it take to reach mastery? Do they stop at mastery, before they arrive at excellence?

They pick up patterns easily and are not learning on the job.

Are they now working on depth (the expert or specialist) or breadth (generalist)?

We have all met someone who is a “Specialist” in 20 categories. Very different experience than someone who is an expert and dives deep into one or two categories.

Are they stale?

Are they continuing to update their knowledge and skills, not just taking any fad that comes along?

“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?

Are they holding themselves accountable to the highest standards?

## **Get Back to You Quickly**

How long does it take to get a reply from the counselor or their staff?

Some counselors try to save money and do it all themselves.

Some counselors don't get back to you, ever.

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? If so, are they doing it for the benefit of the client or themselves?

Does your counselor push you to grow and lean into the discomfort, being there to support you?

Some counselors just listen the whole session. You can do that with a friend over a cup of coffee. Do they add value?

## **Responsiveness**

Does your counselor regularly ask you if this is working for you and if you are getting your money's worth? Do they adjust to you? Can they take feedback?

## **I will let you in on a secret**

The biggest mistake couples make is waiting too long to seek help.

They procrastinate for a number of reasons that make sense. I call it sabotage, though. If it were a physical illness, you would not wait that long because it would endanger you. The same is true of couples counseling. It endangers your relationship to wait too long. The longer you wait, the less likely you will fix it. The longer you wait, the more likely you need a highly experienced, highly trained relationship expert.

### **How do I make the decision?**

Get the information you need. You know what you need to know. Make a choice and then call the choice and start counseling. No more excuses.

My Office Manager, Michelle, can be reached at 585.544.5342 and she will walk you through the process and schedule an appointment. Give her a call today.