

GUIDE TO MARITAL/COUPLES THERAPY

James J. Crist, Ph.D.

You and your partner have taken a courageous step by deciding to pursue couples therapy. Given the high divorce rate, it is clear that many couples do not know how to choose a compatible partner and how to resolve problems when they arise. Many couples enter therapy with unrealistic expectations and end up dropping out prematurely. This guide will help you to understand what to expect in therapy and hopefully will help you to achieve a successful outcome.

Couples therapy is hard—much harder than individual therapy. You may feel as if your heart is on the line and you have experienced so much hurt and anger that you cannot take anymore. It can be very hard to listen to your partner's complaints about you, particularly if you already feel bad about your role in your problems. You may have the urge to strike back in anger, which only makes things worse. Some sessions may be so difficult that you are tempted to give up. It can also be difficult if your therapist appears to be more supportive of your partner—which at times will happen.

All of these feelings are normal! But you and your partner need a “no-exit contract.” You should agree to give couples sessions at least 6-10 sessions and there will be no talk of separation or divorce during that time. This allows both partners to feel safe enough to work on the relationship. Also, if you give it an honest chance, you are less likely to have regrets later if you do choose to separate and never really gave counseling a fair try. Divorce is one of the most stressful things a family can experience; children are almost always hurt in the process, though they may not tell you so. However, it is important to recognize that separation is a potential outcome of couples counseling.

Couples run into problems for a variety of reasons. The most common include lack of healthy communication skills, financial disagreements, and parenting differences. Sometimes, dysfunction in one partner such as addiction or depression can cause problems. While infidelity can be a reason, more often than not it is a symptom of other problems, either in the marriage or in one partner. Each person brings to a relationship a unique set of expectations about how relationships “should” work, based on one's family history and prior relationship history. When these expectations clash, problems occur. One thing to remember is that both partners contribute to marital difficulties. While it may be true that in some instances one partner is the primary cause, it usually takes both partners working together to create meaningful change.

Developing a healthy marriage requires the following: the ability to communicate effectively, meaning in ways that your partner can hear; the ability to accommodate each other's differences; the ability to attempt to repair misunderstandings; and the ability to admit to your own shortcomings and take responsibility for your role in your relationship problems. These are skills that can be learned.

By following some basic guidelines, your sessions will be more productive. Try to listen carefully to your partner's concerns without interrupting. You must be as interested in understanding his/her perspective as you are in sharing your own. When it is your turn to speak, choose your words carefully and monitor your tone—remember your goal is to be understood by your partner, not to attack. Try to look at your partner when you are speaking—sit on the couch together if possible. Avoid the temptation of dragging up all of your past hurts, especially at the beginning. At least once a week, try to make a date to do something together—something you used to do early in your relationship. Avoid talking about any problems during these times.

The times in-between sessions can be difficult. You may be tempted to continue arguments that started during the sessions. Either or both of you may stray from the techniques you are learning. If and when this happens, gently remind each other. Even if you did not “start” the problem, you can still take responsibility for de-escalating the conflict. If needed, agree to flag the problem and wait until the next session to discuss it. Either partner must have the ability to stop an argument if tensions are rising and the potential for disaster is present. However, if you must do so, promise to address it at a later date—be specific if possible.

The following are some suggested books on relationships that I recommend. The more you read and understand about the dynamics of relationships and conflict, the better your chances are of successful resolution. While both partners should read up, do not worry if your partner appears resistant. Not everyone learns best by reading—there are other ways of learning about relationships.

Divorce Busting. Michele Weiner-Davis, M.S.W. Fireside (Simon & Shuster), NY: 1992.

Getting The Love You Want—“A Guide for Couples.” Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. Harper & Row, Publishers, NY: 1988.

Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus—“A Practical Guide for Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in Your Relationships.” John Gray, Ph.D. HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.:

Relationship Rescue—“A Seven Step Strategy for Reconnecting With Your Partner.” Phillip C. McGraw, Ph.D. Hyperion, NY: 2000.

The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work. John M. Gottman, Ph.D. Crown Publishers, Inc, NY: 1999.