

How to get the most from your couples therapy

NICK K. CHOATE

Introduction

When partners begin couples counseling for the first time, it can be quite a formidable task. There are often a number of preconceived notions each partner can have surrounding this process. Maybe you had a previous experience with a therapist that left you burned to counseling or can recall a terrible therapy scene in a movie that just made you cringe. I get it and completely understand your hesitation in coming! But, because that is the case and couples are all too often in the dark about what to expect I developed this handout to help provide you with some ideas of what to anticipate. I want each partner coming to THRIVE to feel confident stepping into this process knowing they will be protected while sharing their experiences but also what will be expected of them while they are engaged in this work.

When you schedule your appointment, couples will be asked to read through this document prior to attending their first session. During that session, one of the questions you will be asked is if you read through it and what stood out for you, so please take your time reading.

This document is broken up into three sections: 1.) How

to prepare for your sessions; 2.) Brief concepts and approaches to healthy relationships and productive couples work; 3.) Helpful resources couples can incorporate outside of their sessions.

Roles within therapy

What are our roles, therapist and partners, while in therapy? My primary role as your therapist is to be your “relationship processor” or rather to help improve and strengthen your relationship through your individual responses while maintaining your core values and deeply held principles. I work on behalf of your relationship, not the individuals, a common misconception of couples counseling. I help you see where partners keep getting stuck or disconnected so you can make repairs, rebuild trust and get what you need in your intimate partnership. My aim is to model a “safe zone” for each partner to connect with until you are able to reestablish a trusting bond between one another.

Your job, as partners, is to create your own individual objectives for engaging in couples therapy - “Why am I willing to make changes for this person?” I have found couples are most effective

when they have a clear direction about the partner they aspire to be in their relationship.

Preparing for sessions

Couples therapy is intended to help partners increase their knowledge about themselves, their partner and the patterns that interrupt their healthy interactions. Therapy becomes effective when couples begin to apply their new understanding of their old, ineffective patterns to developing healthier interactions with one another.

Key things couples can consider to improve their understanding:

- What kind of life do you want to have together and individually;
- What kind of partner do you want to be in order to build the life and relationship you want for the future;
- What blocks you from becoming the kind of partner you aspire to be;
- What skills or knowledge are necessary to perform the above tasks?

Things to avoid in sessions

Next, would like to look at three common, and often unproductive, conversations

that shows up with couples coming into counseling:

- 1.) Focusing solely on whatever problem happens to be on the couple's minds at the moment. While this may appear to be helping clear the air, the conversation often turns reactive and an ineffectual approach to couples work. That is to say, problems are "above water-level" reactions and do little to assist with getting to the heart of the matter.
- 2.) Coming to sessions saying, "I don't know what to talk about?" While that response can lead to some interesting territory in your partnership, often this approach is disorganized and again can lead to reactivity. This is a time for partners to take ownership of their relationship goals.
- 3.) Wanting to discuss whatever fight you are in at the moment

"The grass isn't always greener on the other side, but it is where you water it."

~ Dr. John Gottman

or since your last meeting. Discussing fights or arguments often leave couples spinning or feeling stuck and leads to the question, "Are we really getting anywhere with counseling?" Over time, the answer becomes painfully honest and answers itself. It is often here that couples leave counseling saying that it was, in effect, "unhelpful."

What to do instead

In order for a relationship to flourish and thrive, couples can not solely focus on things that are wrong. Rather, focus on sustainable improvements your relationship could use:

- having a vision of the life you want to build together as well as individually
- strengthen appropriate attitudes and skills
- communication skills that convey you are a team
- motivation to stay the course
- time to review progress and successes

Every couple will have disagreements, it is apart of our individuality choosing to connect but focusing solely on disconnections rather than what connects partners has shown to be much more fruitful labor and can lead to more positive outcomes.

Couples often believe that building a deep, life long relationship is suppose to come easily and naturally. When it doesn't we are ready to throw in the towel in search of something else that doesn't exist. In the words of Dr. John Gottman, "The grass isn't always greener on the other side, but it is where you water it."

Relationships take trade-offs and investments, sometimes difficult ones. Let me share a few you have to consider stepping into this work:

First, it takes time to nurture a relationship that thrives: time where you're alone and together, to play, dream, plan, coordinate, relax, and just hangout. These things will encroach on other areas of your personal and professional life.

Second, it'll take our energy. Energy is needed to sustain improvements, to stay aware that change is often slow and gradual, remembering to be more respectful, giving and grateful. It all takes energy to remember and be different.

Lastly, we will get uncomfortable. There will be times where your emotional comfort will be challenged. You'll be asked to trying new things, new ways of thinking, doing, even reacting. It will be uncomfortable to hear certain things but instead of becoming resentful through confronting, complaining or shutting down, see if you can remain open and curious, try to gain some clarity. Yes, in the beginning, it will be emotionally risky to stay open but remember "the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

When these trade-offs are considered there is a distinct difference between short-term comforts and the long-term gratification when creating a fulfilling relationship; effort is required of each partner to

sustain an interdependent relationship.

Ways both partners can help move the relationship towards this goal is reflecting on a couple of things before each session:

- why are you coming to therapy and what are wanting to accomplish;
- consider your next steps that would support your larger objectives for yourself and your relationship.

These reflections will take some due diligence on each individuals part to sit with and consider. It is much like making an appointment your doctor and when you get there saying, *"I don't really having anything to bring up, what do you think?"* Your ownership and investment will payoff in the long run.

Concepts to consider for couples therapy and your relationship

When you research the outcomes of early couples counseling, the numbers are less than encouraging: 50% of couples say they benefitted from attending couples counseling. However, that number grows significantly when therapists are familiar with models like Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) or The Gottman Method, both models we utilize at THRIVE in our couples therapy. These models have helped couples see significant improvements in their relationship, and more than 75% of couples report seeing improvements - lowered

reactivity during disagreements, improved communication, deeper sense of connectivity and intimacy - in their relationship.

What of the 25% that did not see success? Further digging revealed ongoing abuse (physical and/or emotional) and safety was never able to be established during therapy. Safety is key for trust and intimacy to take root in couples counseling.

What are some things that can help you and your partner identify areas to work on or stimulate discussion between sessions:

Attitude is key

When it comes to improving your relationship, a partners attitude towards change can make or break what could potentially occur in sessions. What to do and how to do it is relatively easy to identify. Often the challenge comes when a partner is asked why they don't want to change.

This is where the EFT and Gottman models can help couples begin to understand the underbelly of their disconnect. If a couple can begin to understand the motivations behind their partners actions, then, they can begin to put the pieces together of how they can respond differently, emotionally, thoughtfully, attitudinally.

As mentioned before, partners are not perfect so there will certainly be some flawed assumptions about your partner and flaws s/he has

about you. Problem is, we don't want to believe that our assumptions of our partner are wrong.

Focus on changing yourself

Couples experience better outcomes in counseling when partners approach with personal goals to grow rather than focusing on trying to change the other person. I am at my best for the relationship when a partner can set objectives s/he would like to achieve to help them grow in the relationship and toward their own objective. However, trouble occurs when our hope, ambitions and expectations are to change the other person rather than changing ourselves or our expectations.

Improving your response

Easily, one of the more difficult parts of couples therapy is helping each partner realize areas to improve their responses to their disconnections. It's always easier to focus on building a case why someone else should improve but as we looked at before you can't change your partner and your partner can't change you. You can influence one another but you can't change them. So, see if you can remain open and curious about your responses to your partner. What is it that you wish they knew?

Couples therapy has the potential to open a lot of closed doors in each of your stories. These can help you understand what bothers you or why your partner knows

how to push your buttons. The crux of the matter, the more you believe your partner is the one that needs to be different, the less initiative you will take to change the dynamics between you; change starts with you.

Conflict as a key to harmony

Growth can and does come from challenging the status quo in your relationship; disagreements, dissatisfaction and striving can change things for the better. The paradox, however, is learning to step into conflict trusting that it can help you grow. Healthy conflict helps both partners better understand what each one is needing from the other. This can be scary at first because you'll be confronted with a different reality but stepping in to it with openness, humility, even a little vulnerability can allow both partners to help one another.

Consider with me a few difficult questions and how they might challenge your status quo:

- What price will your partner have to pay to improve their responses to you? Would you be willing to pay that to change for them?
- Can you legitimately expect your partner to treat you better than you treat yourself?
- If you want your partner to change, have you considered what you can do to make it easier for them?

Communication

Healthy communication is important but, believe it or not, it is more difficult than people really understand. However, there are three qualities of effective communication that couples can begin to use before, while and following their work: maintain respect for one another; approach differences with openness for your partner and what they are sharing; exercise persistence in understanding and desiring to connect with your partner.

Incorporating resources into your couples work

As we prepare to draw this to a close, I would like you to consider one last thing, see where you can begin to incorporate resources into your work. When something is important to you, you give yourself over to it. I want you to give yourself over to your relationship; let it become a priority in your life!

Any type of shift is difficult and with couples work it's no different. For instance, if you're wanting to maintain a healthy lifestyle, exercising wouldn't be your only resource. Rather, you would use several different tools to ensure change was more likely: watching what you eat, getting a membership at a gym, talking with a professional or doctor, and investigating reading material. Couples can approach their relationship work the same way.

When couples integrate different resources into their

therapy it helps relational concepts to take root.

Some of resources I encourage couples to look into:s:

- Books - *Hold Me Tight, Created for Connection, Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work, Love & Respect, Getting the Love You Want, The New Rules of Marriage*
- Workbooks- *Emotionally Focused Workbook for Couples; Getting the Love You Want WB; Love & Respect WB;*
- Podcasts - *Where Shall We Begin; Relationship Alive; The Art of Relationships; Love & Respect; RISE Together.*

These are just a few of the titles I have enjoyed reading. I invite you to take some time and look for yourselves.

Final Thoughts

I would like to leave you with just a few final thoughts:

Couples counseling takes time. Often it is because partners are having these conversations for the first time it appears as though things are getting worse before they get better. Much like resetting a fractured bone, it has to be broken again in order to properly heal. It took time for both of you to get here and it will take some time to see change. However, if both partners have carefully read through this document, then, you will be in a great place to take the appropriate steps when you come in. Quick fixes rarely amount to much in the long run.

With couples work “Slow is fast.” I want each partner to see what they bring to the relationships, how they influence one another, what their moves are, and what you are needing from one another. This takes time, acceptance, and trust.

Your partner has the potential to become a healthier version of your unfinished business. Consider why you chose this person out of all the others that are out there? Why is that? Maybe they can help you finally heal and become the

better version of what you have longed for in your story.

Effective change require us to access insight and action. Action without insight is thoughtlessness. Insight without action is passivity.

I’m will make mistakes. I’m sure by now you have found a few of those in this document, I left those for you on purpose. I wanted you to see that I am not perfect. I will make mistakes, not always get it right and will miss things, sometimes even get it wrong. You know your relationship better than anyone else so I

will need your help putting the pieces together. I’m a visitor, please show me around.

I hope this document helps I look forward to meeting you and consider it a privilege and blessing to sit with your love story. Couples counseling is sacred ground for a therapist because you are inviting me into your relationship and few people have the opportunity to be on such hallowed ground, to hear such deep longings for another. Thank you. I will see you soon.