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HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM YOUR COUPLES THERAPY

After 22 years of clinical experience and specializing in working with hundreds of couples, I have arrived at some guidelines that can make our work more effective. My primary role is to help you improve your responsiveness to each other without violating your core beliefs/values. I have many tools to help you become more effective partners, but these tools work best when you are clear about your vision of how you would like your relationship to be.

Couples are often uncertain about the process of couples therapy. I have found that most couples approach therapy with the notion that each person will describe their own distress and somehow the therapist will assist them to create a happier, more functional relationship. They expect to learn some new or better skills. Most, however, hope their partner will do most of the changing in the problem areas.

FOCUS ON CHANGING YOURSELF RATHER THAN YOUR PARTNER

Couples therapy works best if you have more goals for yourself than for your partner. The hardest part of couples therapy is accepting that you will need to improve your response to a problem (how you think about it, feel about it, or what to do about it). Very few people want to focus on improving their own responses. It's more common to build a strong case for why the other should do the improving

You can't change your partner. Your partner can't change you. You can influence each other, but that does not mean you can change each other. Becoming a more effective partner is the most powerful way to change a relationship.

Businesses and marriages fail for three reasons:

- Not learning from the past
- Not adapting to changing conditions
- A lack of ability to predict probable future problems and take action

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF COUPLES THERAPY

The major aim of couples therapy is to:

- Increase your knowledge about yourself, your partner, and your patterns of feeling/behavior/thinking that create conflict, insecurity, and distance in the relationship;
- Develop a better repair mechanism to resolve old issues from the past and more effectively process present/future issues.
- Expand your ability to positively nurture your relationship.

Simply put, couples therapy should help make crystal clear:

- The kind of life and relationship you want to build together
- The kind of partner you aspire to be in order to build the kind of relationship you want to create
- Your individual blocks to becoming the kind of partner you desire to be
- The skills and knowledge necessary to do the above tasks.

RISKS VS REWARDS

To create the relationship you really desire, there will likely be some difficult trade-offs and tough choices for each person.

TIME It takes time to create a relationship that flourishes: time to be together, to play, to nurture, to hang out, to plan, to share with your family, and so on. This time will encroach on some other valuable areas of your personal or professional time, so be prepared. In all these areas, there is generally a conflict between short-term gratification and the long-term goal of creating a satisfying relationship.

The blunt reality is that, in an interdependent relationship, effort is required on the part of each person to make a sustained improvement. It is like pairs figure skating: one person cannot do most of the work and still create an exceptional team.

ACTION Effective change requires insight plus action. Insight without action is passivity. Action without insight is impulsivity. Insight plus action leads to clarity and power.

Change occurs faster when partners are prepared to take risks of trying to interact differently outside the session. Often it will feel safer to talk about the tough issues in the protected context of therapy. The more you are willing to use your new insights by putting them into action, the more rewarding the changes in your marital dance.