

# Understanding Couples Therapy





*Drs. Ellyn Bader and Peter Pearson have specialized in helping couples since the early 1980s and have been married almost as long. They are co-founders and co-directors of The Couples Institute, and continually receive industry and media attention for their innovations in couples therapy.*

## **Understanding Couples Therapy: What skilled Therapists Do**

It's only fair to warn you. This document is not a simple bumper sticker response to thoughtful questions about couples therapy or how to choose a good therapist.

You deserve to know more about what you are engaging in, and if the professional you seek is qualified. Is he or she the right one for you before investing your time, effort, money and vulnerability?

### **Goals, Objectives, and What Is Included in Good Couples Therapy**

The major goal of couple's therapy is to increase your knowledge about yourself, your partner, and the patterns of interaction between you. Therapy becomes effective as you apply new knowledge to break ineffective patterns and develop better ones.

Good couples therapy increases your clarity about:

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

Here are some guidelines to help you choose a skilled therapist as you review the complex assortment of possibilities on therapists' websites.

### **How to Choose a Skilled Couple's Therapist**

Experience matters. But how can you detect an experienced couple's therapist from one who occasionally sees couples over the years?

Curiously, it has to do with the website description about how they describe themselves and how they work.

For example, if the therapist emphasizes being empathic, supportive, non-judgmental, understanding and neutral, this means they work mostly with individuals. This approach often fits well for working with individual clients.

However, when working with a marriage that is riddled with tension, distancing and conflict, the therapist needs to be actively involved to keep the couple from repeating the same negative patterns in the office.

'Actively involved' means the therapist will interrupt to stop the impulses to criticize, blame, shut down or otherwise be non-collaborative.

Those interruptions help the couple change direction to a more productive path. He or she might also interrupt to offer valuable insights about the negative communication that is unfolding in the office.

Less skilled therapists do little coaching, give little feedback and suggestions, and way too often ask "Well, what do you think?"

Below you will find more information about what you can expect from good couples therapy and what you can do to get the most from it . It ends with a checklist to help you decide if couples therapy is right for your situation and see if your marriage is on track..

### **Your Attitude is The Key to Getting The Most From Couples Therapy**

When it comes to improving your relationship, your attitude toward change is more important than what action to take.

Identifying what to do and how to do it is often easy. The bigger challenge is understanding why you don't do it.

It is often more effective to think differently about a problem, instead of just trying to figure out what action to take.

### **Focus on Changing Yourself Rather than Your Partner**

Couples therapy works best if you have more goals for yourself than for your partner. Therapists work best when they help you reach objectives you set for yourself. It's human

nature to try to change one's partner instead of adjusting one's own expectations. This aspect of human nature is what keeps therapists in business.

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 response. It's more common to build a strong case for why your partner should do the improving.

Becoming a more effective partner is the most efficient way to change a relationship.

### **Interesting Concepts About Yourself And Change**

Everybody experiences some form of fear, insecurity or vulnerability in a relationship. How you handle that anxiety is the key to individual and relationship growth.

1. Most of the ineffective things we do in relationships fall into just a few categories:

- Blame or attempting to dominate
- Disengaging / withdrawal
- Resentful compliance
- Whining
- Denial

You can learn a lot about yourself by understanding what annoys you and how you handle it. How you and your partner manage these reactions will determine how magnificent or how miserable your relationship will be. The more you believe your partner should be different, the less initiative you will take to change the patterns between the two of you.

2. If you strive to always feel emotionally safe in your relationship, and you achieve that, you will pay the price by becoming dull.

3. Trust is the foundation of a flourishing relationship. You create trust by doing what you say you will do.

4. It's impossible to be in a highly inter-dependent relationship without ever being judgmental or being judged. This means giving up the goal for you and/or your partner to become non-judgmental.

Good couples' therapists with just about any training can support and apply these principles. The most common complaint from couples working with an inexperienced therapist is "All our therapist did was let us argue in the office. We could have done that at home."

## Is Couples Therapy Right for Your Situation?

Consider couples therapy if:

- You and your partner have tried talking about the problem(s) but ended up more distant, upset and self-protective than ever.
- You have tried talking to friends or other influential people in your life but stay stuck.
- You are afraid to talk to friends or others about your struggles.
- You have read good self-help books on relationships and still feel stuck.
- The problems are too big to ignore and you are feeling more and more distant with fewer and fewer good times.
- The tension is beginning to affect the children (if children are at home)
- Your discouragement and feeling alone has been getting worse over the months
- You think about separation as a way of getting relief.

The more statements that fit, the more your relationship has gotten off track.

You could even consider therapy if you don't have any major struggles, but want to make things better, like someone who hires a personal trainer to become more fit.

Or a part of you believes that problems, worries and insecurities can be the foundation and catalyst to correct things that need to be corrected. They set the stage to do the work, and to help you realize the awesome promise of why you got together with your partner in the first place.

Good luck in whatever path you choose,

Peter Pearson and Ellyn Bader

*For additional information and free resources, please visit our site:*

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