

# Couples Therapists Take Charge

CREATE MOTIVATION  
REVIEW FIGHTS PRODUCTIVELY  
PROMOTE INTIMACY



Dear Colleague,

A question we are frequently asked is, “How can I feel more confident and take charge of difficult couples sessions?” If you’ve asked yourself that question then get ready to feel more confident.

We created these three exercises so that you could take charge in some of the tougher areas in couples therapy. You’ll work smarter, not harder or longer, to get to a level of confidence that allows you to actually enjoy working with couples and see results more quickly.

The first, “10 Smart Questions,” creates motivation and a more collaborative start to therapy. It puts each partner in a better position to identify each other’s needs and areas for development – doing the work for you.

The next, “After Action Review,” allows you to review fights productively, disrupting hostility and creating constructive ways for couples to address what went wrong so that it happens less in the future.

The final one, “Date Night Makeover,” promotes intimacy and interest between partners, furthering opportunities for differentiation and growth.

You’ll find a guide to the exercises on the next page, including notes for you, the therapist, and you can click or scroll from there.

We hope these exercises are as productive for you as they are for us.

Thanks for your commitment to excellent couples therapy,

Dr. Ellyn Bader and Dr. Peter Pearson

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## Notes for Therapists

### 10 Smart Questions

These questions will help you work smarter, while your clients are working harder than you are. It helps them identify their areas of strength and areas that require change.

The questions enable you to guide more insightful discussions and create more productive interactions within a couple. By asking each other these questions, the partners become more involved in their own process of insight and motivation for change, rather than responding defensively to you leading them to emotional places they may not want to visit.

First, ask each partner to read all of the questions. This preview won't entirely eliminate the defensiveness and self-protective responses that often accompany these kinds of questions, but it will reduce them considerably.

When asking about change use the phrase, "Is there any part of you that is willing to ...?" You will get more affirmative responses and cooperation by asking if just "a part" of a person wants to change. "Are you willing to ..." is a much bigger challenge, and more likely to invite defensiveness.

Remind couples that this isn't the time to negotiate solutions. That's an entirely different process. (We have excellent blogs on that topic, by the way. Just go to [www.couplesinstitute.com](http://www.couplesinstitute.com) and search 'negotiation')."

Here is some helpful commentary on each question. A complete set of the questions, without these explanations, is included further down for you to use with your couples.

You might not get through all these questions in a single session. The key is to stay flexible according to the needs of the couple in the moment.

1. What I want from you is \_\_\_\_\_ (or, depending upon the situation,) the change I would like to see in you is \_\_\_\_\_.  
Is that something any part of you has an interest in doing? Why or why not? If so, how could I be more supportive of you responding to me?

*This cuts to the core of much of couples therapy work.*

*Too often what you hear will be complaints or criticisms that are expressions of disappointments, grief or distress. Generally there is little clarity about the desired response and rarely does the complaining partner believe they need to do anything to support the change they seek.*

*It is quite rare for the complaining partner to inquire whether the partner has any interest in making the requested change. Often, the complainer believes, "If my partner really understood me, they would make the change in a timely and willing fashion." So the complaining partner wrongly keeps the focus on being understood. It's pretty common that the partner actually understands the complaint and still does little or nothing to reduce the distress.*

*It is important to explore why the partner is or is not willing to make any or all of the requested change.*

2. What do you think it will cost you to respond to me the way I would like?

*A common erroneous belief is, "I'm not asking for very much. Therefore it won't be much of an effort for my partner to give me what I*

want.” *It’s diagnostic to see the reaction of the complaining partner when the “price” is described.*

3. Honey, if you could choose only one thing to improve about me, what would it be? Or, if you had one wish granted what would it be? Describe it in specific, action-oriented terms as well as the effect it would have on you.

*Why this question? Couples have so many complaints there is little focus on their therapeutic evolution and the therapist spends too much time reacting to the immediate stress of the moment.*

*The follow up question is, “What are the implications if you get what you want or if you don’t get what you want? This follow up question outlines the pain and benefits of responding to the partner.*

4. What do you think each of us needs to learn in order to become more effective partners or to be a better team?

*Too often therapists teach concepts and interventions that one or the other or both have little interest in learning. Exploring becomes a struggle. Insights don’t last when there is no motivation.*

5. What do you think is the smallest shift you could make and I could make that would have a significant role in improving our relationship?

*This helps the therapist look at where to focus the immediate energy.*

6. What is one belief you think I have about you that you think is entirely erroneous?

*Partners often surprise each other on this one.*

7. What is the worst thing I have done to you? Do you still harbor negative emotions about it?



*This question probes for trauma and its after effects.*

8. What do you value most about who I am? Why is this important to you?

*This adds a little balance to all the complaints couples bring up and gives you a more complete picture of their relationship.*

9. Think of a time, place or situation when we were at our best. Why does that stand out for you?

*This continues to add balance to all the complaints they have made and helps move the session to a more positive ending.*

10. What are some goals/dreams you have that excite your imagination – things that you would like to do, be or have? Does this include dreams for yourself, us as a couple and for the family? To help the brainstorm, imagine time, money or talent is no obstacle.

*Why do we ask this question? Couples usually come to therapy to resolve a problem or condition. Too often when we ask couples what they would feel if the problem is solved, they respond with, "OK, or "Fine," or "I'd feel relief."*

*Goals with such tempered enthusiasm generate insufficient excitement to get them through difficult times. Passion is what drives us when times are tough. Look for the passion in the relationship.*

We hope you will find these questions useful to structure the interaction more successfully with your high distress couples. Now that you have seen the questions and the rationale behind them, remember that there is a blank version of this questionnaire in this collection, ready for you to use.

## **After-Action Review (*Therapists' Notes*)**

By definition, unhappy or disconnected couples will have many painful disagreements or arguments. The more disconnected they are, the more pain they are in. This makes it harder for each to recognize and accept responsibility for their contributions to the emotional distance, which in turn makes it harder for you to get sustained traction in making progress.

The After-Action Review is a tool for you to use in sessions when partners arrive distressed and report a bad fight they had that week. This tool will help you and help them.

This exercise enables each partner to make a self-assessment after a fight or difficult discussion. It does four key things:

- Asks them to self-assess in a non-threatening way. Partners often find it easier to admit to something on paper rather than when being asked by you in front of the other. When a therapist asks all these questions, it can feel like an interrogation or accusation rather than an exploration.
- Helps lay the foundation for couples to use their self-assessment in setting goals.
- Gives couples an overview of the necessary skills and attitudes to improve their relationship.
- Allows each person to see the disagreement not just from his or her own perspective, but from their partner's perspective.

The next time your couples complain about a fight or disagreement they've recently had, experiment with using this exercise to work through the event more productively.



## **Date Night Makeover (*Therapists' Notes*)**

This handout encourages couples to connect on a deeper level than the average conversation allows. Without hidden agendas or ulterior motives, couples can ask and answer questions that give them practice exploring and listening together.

Use it with any couples who want more intimacy and have trouble talking to each other. It can provide positive structure on a date night and help them deepen their relationship.

From here...

The handouts begin on the next page. You can use them in any order. Experiment. Keep stretching and growing, and know that you are helping your couples do the same.



**(10 Smart Questions, cont'd)**

4. What do you think each of us needs to learn in order to become more effective partners or to be a better team?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What do you think is the smallest shift you could make and I could make that would have a significant role in improving our relationship?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. What is one belief you think I have about you that you think is entirely erroneous?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. What is the worst thing I did to you and do you still harbor negative emotions about it?

***(10 Smart Questions, con't)***

8. What do you value most about who I am? Why is this important to you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. Think of a time, place or situation when we were at our best. Why does that stand out for you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
10. What are some goals/dreams you have that excite your imagination - things that you would like to do, be or have? Does this include dreams for yourself, us as a couple and for the family? To help the brainstorm, imagine time, money or talent is no obstacle.

## After-Action Review

Any given disagreement/fight has the potential to make things worse or better. What makes the difference?

The following skills can make disagreements more collaborative. With these skills, disagreements can become the foundation for greater emotional connection, problem solving and evolution of your relationship.

Look at the following descriptive sentences and rate yourself on each one of them with respect to your last disagreement with your partner. Use a scale of 1-10, with 1 meaning "not at all" and 10 meaning "total agreement," and put your score in the box to the right of each statement.

1. I described the problem without blaming my partner or making them wrong.	
2. I stayed curious and asked questions about my partner's concerns.	
3. I consistently recapped what I was hearing.	
4. I was clear about expressing what I wanted.	
5. My partner will say I was clear in describing what I wanted.	
6. I was clear explaining why my concerns were important to me.	
7. My partner will say I was clear explaining why my concerns were important.	

8. I was clear about stating what this problem symbolized or represented to me.	
9. I was I clear about what the problem symbolized or represented to my partner.	
10. I kept my voice tone and volume in check to avoid triggering my partner.	
11. I communicated to my partner that I am clear on the price my partner will have to pay to give me what I want.	
12. My partner believes I am committed to making it easier for my him or her to give me what I want.	
13. My partner would say I am making it easier for him or her to give me what I want.	
14. I believe I have the will to learn and apply the insights and skills necessary to create better discussions when we disagree.	
15. My partner would say I have the determination to apply the insights and skills necessary to create better discussions when we disagree.	

After you complete this checklist, swap forms with your partner to see what you can learn about each other.

Reflect on what you can do differently in the future.

Where will you focus your attention to improve next time?



## Date Night Makeover

For an interesting and stimulating date with your partner, explore these questions. They invite you to go a little deeper than just discussing work, kids, vacation or sports. They can help you to discover – or rediscover – more about each other.

As you take turns asking and responding, remember to suspend any negative judgment and to treat each other's responses with compassion, curiosity, openness and respect.

These questions are not for problem solving. Problem solving involves other regions of the brain, parts that are incompatible with exploring ideas, large goals, emotions and dreams.

So avoid asking problems solving questions like, "How would you do that?" Simply ask questions that expand what your partner is saying and frequently recap what you are hearing. Listening well, being curious and recapping are priceless gifts for your partner.

Also try not to race through the questions. Instead, enjoy your experience of exploring.

1. If you could change only one thing in your life, what would that be ... and why?
2. On a regular day, what do you find yourself thinking about the most?
3. If you could write a song about your life, what type of music would you use?
4. What things in your life bring you the greatest pleasure?

***(Date Night Makeover, cont'd)***

5. What do you feel is your greatest accomplishment in your life? Did other people help to make that happen?
6. In what settings are you the happiest / eager / most comfortable?
7. What things do you look forward to each day? In your life?
8. If you had three wishes that came come true, what would they be?
9. What things would you want to change right now, and why?
10. What major regret do you have in life so far? Is it too late to change it?
11. What would be your ideal romantic date?
12. Is there a belief or attitude that seems to interfere with creating or pursuing a dream?
13. What are a couple of things that you appreciate about our relationship and why do these things seem significant?
14. In what situations do you feel most afraid or insecure?
15. What would you like to do outdoors that you have not done before? Are there any extreme sports that you'd like to try?
16. What country or place would you like to visit that you haven't visited yet?
17. What family member did you most admire when you were a child? Why?

18. What activities did your mother/father do that you most wish they'd taught you?

19. What do you most wish you'd learned from your mother/father?

20. What are some things that excite your imagination when you imagine doing them? To help brainstorm ideas imagine that time, talent and money are not obstacles.

**Two bonus questions**

21. What question about our money or future spending do you find it hard to ask?

22. What are your favorite things to spend money on?