

Short Answers to Three Tricky Questions Couples Ask Their Therapist A Thoughtful Conversation between Pete and Michelle

by Peter Pearson, Ph.D. and Michelle Wangler, M.A. MFT

Michelle: There are several devilishly difficult questions that couples routinely ask therapists. I'm sure you've heard them, Pete, and struggled with them just as I have. The first one is frequently asked by a potential client – someone who is “shopping” for a therapist. The second question is usually raised by someone who has very reluctantly joined their partner in therapy. The third one comes from any client in couples therapy resisting change. So you can see that your answers are important. Really important. Let's create some guidelines for answering them.

Pete: Well, Michelle, the questions can be as complex as quadratic equations, so we struggle to give clear, concise responses. Seeing as many couples as I do in my practice, I've had unlimited opportunities to experiment with different responses. I am pleased to share some winning replies to these torturous questions.

Michelle: Here's one I dislike. **“What is your success rate?”**

You know that what the person really wants to know is whether you are better than the average therapist. So it just won't work to reply with a bland, general answer like, “What is your definition of success?” or “That depends upon your motivation.” I'd like to engage them in a conversation that gets them thinking while, at the same time, establishes that I know what I'm talking about.

Pete: I used to hate this question. You and I both know that success depends upon a lot of things, including the person's definition of success, just as you suggested. But you can't put it back on them that way, especially when they're shopping for a therapist. This is how that dialogue might unfold if we take it in a different direction:

Potential client: So what is your success rate?

Therapist: It's exceptional when couples have goals that are reasonably aligned.

Potential client: What if they have goals that are not aligned?

Therapist: The more distant the goals, the more unpredictable the outcome.

Potential client: What if I want to save the marriage and my spouse wants to leave?

Therapist: That is the most unpredictable of all goals.

Potential client: Then what should I do?

Therapist: It is not what you should do as an individual. It is what will be required of both of you. This means having a non-defensive discussion about your problems. Then identify what would be required of each of you to deal with these issues. Understanding your blocks to doing what is required is another important step. Then identify goals that excite your imagination. This big picture can help you make a more intelligent decision about your future.

This reply helps them feel like I know how to work with distressed couples, and gives a sense of direction when they feel so confused and helpless.

Michelle: Here's a question that I often get from men. **"What good will talking do?"**

I understand that from their perspective, talking doesn't solve problems. And they don't even want to talk in the first place. I'd like to be respectful of their perspective while being convincing at the same time.

Pete: It's no surprise that this question comes mostly from men. And so I often start by complimenting them for their concern because the compliment is disarming to them. I might answer like this:

That's a good question. You are right. Talking by itself won't do much so you are right to be concerned.

But talking can give insights, direction, focus and priorities to what needs to be improved and what doesn't. Talking defines the goals that excite your imagination.

But talking and insight without action is simply passivity.

And action without insight is just chaos.

To create a relationship that feels satisfying and fulfilling – both talking and action are required. Do you think you are up to it?

Why or why not?

I want to engage in a conversation instead of a debate. Turning it back on them, especially with a compassionate, interested facial expression and voice tone can be engaging rather than argumentative.

Michelle: I like the way you followed up asking, “Why or why not?” That in itself elicits more than a yes/no answer!

And here’s my last one for today. **“Why should I have to change?”** I get this question from men and women alike. We know that both partners contribute to the situation but when one is stuck with that attitude it’s difficult to break through.

There’s the actual or implied whine that accompanies the question. And even if your clients don’t ask this question, it’s the subtext within any fierce argument.

Pete: I like a response that answers the person who asked the question while simultaneously and indirectly addressing the other partner. Both people feel heard and both get food for thought.

Just recently a woman pleaded with me, using these exact words, “Why should I have to do all the changing?” And this was my reply:

I’m so glad you asked that question instead of just thinking it. It’s the most fundamental question for why we are meeting.

And it’s understandable. You think to yourself, “Why should I do anything different when I am an innocent bystander to this wreck?” And your husband is thinking the exact same thing. “I get home, minding my own business, and I get attacked. Why should I have to do anything different?”

When you are knee deep in pain and you want your partner to change, and your partner is knee deep in their own pain, what can you do?

Perhaps a small part of each of you might be interested in making a change, even if it is for higher self-esteem by improving your response under pressure. That could provide some immediate relief and progress.

So, is there any part of you (said to the wife, since she is the one who posed the original question), -- even a small faint whisper -- that thinks it's a good idea to have more choices for how to respond, rather than just to pursue, be angry or be resentfully compliant? Is there a part of you that thinks you would be better off if you had more choices and could experiment with leaving the self-protective bubble for the sake of a more satisfying relationship?

Michelle: Yes, It's the question they both have to answer about change, and if one partner refuses to adjust, he or she gives the other an excuse to avoid changing, too!

Thanks for joining me, Pete. We are going to do more of these difficult questions that require a more elaborate response. So stay tuned.