

Summary of Pete's Call on Rethinking First Sessions

The following transcript describes how you can dramatically change your initial session for a couple. Many therapists start with a new couple by inquiring about what brings them in or how they can be of help.

This line of inquiry is necessary to understand their problems. Unfortunately, asking a hostile estranged couple these questions will result in a barrage of blaming and will rarely result in the identification of what they each will do to make things better.

The approach you will read here takes a very different perspective. It is geared to bypass that negative beginning. Instead of defensiveness and avoidance of identifying a significant self-change goal you can get cooperation, and a really big “self-change” goal. This can be done in a smooth, relaxed manner instead of with tension or passivity.

You can also use this approach with couples already in your practice.

[Bold italics indicate Pete talking to the couple. The regular print is Pete talking to the training participants on the call.]

After the usual pleasantries and paperwork, Pete says to the couple;

You know, the typical way to begin a first session is to ask the couple why you're here. Often this results in each person airing their grievances about each other, and after about 10 minutes of complaining and cross-complaining everyone in the room, including me, begins to feel bad!

So what I would like to do is start differently to avoid the bad feelings, and I would also like to get a diagnosis about how well the two of you have been listening to each other. Here's the way I'd like to start today: I'd like to ask each of you to describe what you think the top 3 or 4 major complaints are that your partner has about you. Now, it doesn't matter who goes first because you'll each get your turn. You don't have to list all of them, just what you think the top complaints are that your partner has about you.

Most people want to prove they've been good listeners and they want to get this right. They want to show they've heard their partner and this is what they've been saying. Plus each partner now listens intently because they're wondering if their partner really has listened to them. So this reduces defensiveness about being criticized when the first person brings up the problems. They're not doing that now. It changes the focus by asking:

What do you think are the major complaints your partner has about you? This changes the focus from blame to looking at their contributions to their struggles. It also becomes diagnostic of their level of differentiation in a gentle way.

After one partner lists three or four things, ask:

How confident are you in your description? I'm going to check with your partner, but how confident are you on a scale of 1 - 10? I want to know if they are doing more than just guessing. When they give a rating I ask their partner:

Are they reasonably accurate? I'm not looking for 100% but whether they did reasonably well. Look for some positive expression – the language

here is important. Most times they'll say yes, they did reasonably well. But if they say something important was missed, I quickly say to the speaking partner:

So you did a pretty good job but left something out that seems important. Is there a part of you that is curious about what you missed?

So far they have all said, "Yes, what did I miss?" Now they're asking for feedback about how they've been difficult instead of being defensive. The pull is strong to say, "What am I missing?" When the person hears the missing complaint, they'll say something like, "Ok, that fills in the blanks". Now I'll ask the listening partner:

What is it like to know your partner has heard your complaints? I don't want to go down the path of why they haven't done anything about it, just that they have heard your complaints about what is problematic for you. Is there any part of you that has some appreciation that you have been heard?

So far everyone has said something like, "Yes, I'm glad I have been heard."

Would it be a good idea to express some appreciation to your partner for having heard your complaints? If they give a weak appreciation I say in a lighthearted way:

Is this generally the level of enthusiasm you have in expressing appreciation, when your partner shows they understand all the ways they've been tormenting you? Let's try again to give that appreciation from the part of you that now knows your partner has been listening and in fact is curious about what was missing.

Now the person can give strokes and say, "I appreciate you've been listening. I really didn't know you understood my complaints." Now they're

