

# Maximizing Your Couples Therapy Experience

People often come into couples therapy expecting that they will each tell me their side of the story and I will tell them who is right and who is wrong. Of course, you each hope that you will be deemed right and your partner wrong! Each person has a strong need to tell their side and to justify and defend his or her position. These impulses are extremely common and completely natural.

Unfortunately however, not only are these inclinations mostly unhelpful, they are a large part of how couples often stay stuck. In the words of the Sufi mystic Rumi: “Out beyond ideas of right and wrong, there is a field. I will meet you there.”



The overarching objective of couples therapy is increasing your knowledge about yourself, your partner, your emotions, and the patterns of interaction between you. The effectiveness of therapy depends on your willingness to seek this knowledge, your openness to new ways of thinking and experiencing, and your ability to apply and act on these new understandings.

*Effort, time, and willingness to tolerate some discomfort are essential elements that you must be prepared to contribute in order to be successful.*

Specializing in couples work and having worked with hundreds of couples I have winnowed some of the crucial keys to making progress and advancing most efficiently:

- **Being able to label and talk about your emotions** instead of criticizing, blaming, or withdrawing. This also includes being able to experience and express vulnerable feelings such as hurt, fear and inadequacy.
  - These are critical skills that most of us don't have much training in, but that can make a huge difference. Though it sounds simple, in many ways doing this properly can be more complex and unfamiliar than the other points, and is a large part of what I will help you with.
- **Reflecting and practicing** in between sessions. The more circulation there is (both ways) between the sessions and the rest of your week the faster and more thoroughly you will achieve the relationship you want.
  - This is a part that you as a couple have lots of control over and can have a big impact on the speed (and depth) of your progression. If you just come to the sessions and don't think about things much in between, change will take more time.
- **Having more relationship goals for yourself** than for your partner. And—by corollary—having curiosity and interest in what you can learn and adjust in yourself to make yourself a better partner.
  - Focusing on your partner's shortcomings, what your partner is doing wrong, and so on, is part of how we're wired and seems to feel better (though frustrating!) in the immediate-term. However, in the long-term it is destructive to relationships and keeps issues gridlocked.
  - Learning about yourself and how you can adjust your responses puts you in control of things you can change and improves your odds of getting what you want from your partner.
  - Here again I can help you determine worthwhile a goal, how to make it well-formed, and how to break it down to reachable objectives.

- **Thinking about your patterns as a couple thematically** instead of who did what, who's right, who was more hurt, or who has it easier, etc.
  - Under stress, or when things are not going well it's common for both partners to each feel they are getting the short end of the stick, working harder than their partners, feeling unappreciated, and the like. Remember: if you are feeling this way, there's a good chance your partner is too!
  - Typically the skills to think differently about the patterns in your relationship take some learning and practice. I can teach you some useful frameworks, help you refine your perceptions, see patterns you might not otherwise and put them into a form you can work with.

Here are **some unproductive patterns** to avoid:

- Making the focus of therapy whatever happens to be on your mind at the moment.
- Rehashing the fight of the week, or the fight of the moment without making the effort to put it in the context of what you are trying to achieve in your relationship or dedicating yourself to learning something new or helpful about it.
- Sitting down for our sessions and saying, "I don't know what to talk about, do you?"

Instead, **make it your job** in therapy to:

- Continuously reflect on and refine your objectives for being in therapy.
- Question your negative assumptions and stereotypes about your partner.
- Learn to ask high-quality questions of your partner to find out who they really are and what matters to them.
- Think about the next step or steps for yourself that will move you towards the relationship you want and being the kind of partner you aspire to be.
- Be prepared for each session with a point of focus for how to move the work forward.

Finally, Pete Pearson of the Couples Institute put it best:

*It's easy to be considerate and loving to your partner when the vistas are magnificent, the sun is shining and breezes are gentle. But when it gets bone chilling cold, you're hungry and tired, and your partner is whining and sniveling about how you got them into this mess, that's when you get tested. Your leadership and your character get tested. You can join the finger pointing or become how you aspire to become.*



Adapted from How To Get the Most From Your Couples Therapy  
by Ellyn Bader, Ph.D. and Peter Pearson, Ph.D ~ [www.CouplesInstitute.com](http://www.CouplesInstitute.com)  
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