



How to Get the Most from Couples Counseling

The Big Picture

- **Get Started.** According to marriage researcher Dr. John Gottman, couples wait an average of six years after they are experiencing "serious problems" to seek counseling. It can take several months to more than a year to change the patterns that led to these problems. While you are in counseling, set aside conversations about separation and divorce.
- **Know what you want.** When you plan a trip, it helps to have a destination. If you tell a travel agent, "I don't want to go to Bolivia," you could end up almost anywhere. When you say "I'd like to go to Tahiti," you will end up there. The same is true for relationships. Imagine the kind of relationship you want in. How will you and your partner relate? With a clear vision of your relationship goals, your counselor is much more likely to help you create what you want.
- **Choose a personal goal.** People who start couples therapy are often very clear about how they would like their partner to change. That's a good start. But it's also important to think about how you would like to change. When you imagine your ideal relationship, how will you act? What would you like to stop doing, and what would you like to start doing? For example, would you like to stay calm during disagreements, or let your partner know how you feel instead of staying silent? Would you like to stop yelling, or commit to finishing a conversation instead of walking out? If you focus on changing yourself, the possibilities are endless.

How to Make the Most of Each Session

- **Plan ahead.** Before each session, think about what you want to accomplish. It's important to be able to talk about disagreements and past hurts, but it's also important to look at the big picture. What is working now in your relationship? Is there a negative cycle driving your conversations? Where are you stuck? What can you talk about today that would most likely help you and your partner move forward?
- **Be honest.** Talk about the difficult issues you and your partner are facing. Can you state your own view even when the two of you disagree? Can you listen to your partner when the stakes are high? Some people keep a list of questions, concerns, difficulties, and successes each week, and bring them to each session. Be honest with your counselor too - if something works well, or isn't working - let your counselor know.
- **Focus on yourself.** Focusing on what your partner is doing or not doing usually creates more conflict. Instead, think about how you are when you are at your best. Then work toward being your best self when you are with your partner. When conversations get difficult, listen for the feelings underneath the words, and speak from your deepest values.
- **Identify and resist negative patterns.** It's easy to fall into your relationship's negative cycle, or "dance," when emotions run high. Challenge yourself to understand and resist this tendency. With the help of your counselor, find ways you can step out of the cycle, or do something different before it even starts. You can learn to respond differently to your partner, while still being true to your core values.
- **Practice.** If you are willing to spend time with each other between sessions, to keep an appreciation journal, and to practice new strategies between sessions, your progress will be much faster.
- **Take the long view.** There will be ups and downs as you progress. You might have a few good days or weeks, then slip back into negative patterns. This is not a setback; it's part of the process. The best way to handle this is to learn from it, then dive in again. There will always be difficult moments. But you can learn to move through them more gracefully, and stay connected with each other.

Only you can decide if what you want to accomplish is worth the energy and commitment it takes to do things in a new way. But when you succeed, the rewards are great - a closer, more satisfying relationship and a happier life.