



Institute for
Relational Intimacy

How to Get the Most Out of Relationship Therapy

I value your commitment to your relationship, and respect your investment of time, energy, and financial resources. This document will help you get the most benefit from our work together. Please give it your time and attention, and you will see results from therapy much sooner!

You and I both have a role in this process. Your job is to each find your own individual objectives for being in therapy. For me to help you reach your goals, you need to know what kind of a partner you aspire to be. *What kind of partner do you want to be when things are going well and you and your partner are happy? What about when things are rough, you aren't getting what you want, and your partner isn't happy with you?* Really imagine it. What kind of team member do you want to be? What kind of leader? If you aspire to be very different in these two scenarios, why?

Systems Therapy

I am a systems therapist, which means I don't believe the problem is you, and I don't believe the problem is your partner, but rather the interactions between you. My style of therapy focuses not on the fight you had this morning, but on how you discuss your thoughts and feelings about it. If we just discussed the argument du jour, we couldn't accomplish much. We might even reinforce the problems. I respect your time, relationship, and financial investment too much to go down unproductive paths. Instead of asking "What will I do about this problem?", I want you to ask, "How do I aspire to be in this situation?"

Before each session, you can maximize our progress by doing the following:

1. Reflect on your objectives for being in therapy
2. Think about your next step (not your partner's next step) to create the kind of relationship you want or be the kind of partner you aspire to become.

This will take some effort, and also some time, but will pay off in huge dividends.

Your Objectives for Couple Therapy (and your first homework assignment)

Please take some time to reflect, and then answer these questions:

- What kind of life do you want to build with your partner?
- What kind of partner do you aspire to be in order to build the kind of life and relationship you want to create?

Write your answers on an index card and put them in your wallet. Refer to them often. Discuss them with your partner **BEFORE THE FIRST SESSION**. Really flesh out the life you want to build. See where you agree and differ.

Refer to your index card again, and write down answers to the following:

- How far away are you from the relationship you hope for and the person you want to be?
- What skills or information do you need to be able to close the gap?

Congratulations! You just saved yourself at least 2 couple therapy meetings!

Tradeoffs and Tough Choices

As you work toward building a stronger relationship, there will be some tradeoffs and tough choices. In all of the following areas, most people experience an inner conflict between short-term gratification and

long-term goals. Every person in a team needs to pull their weight or the team will fail. Here are some areas where making tough choices to support long term goals will make or break your couple therapy:

- I've never seen a relationship flourish without an expenditure of time. You will need to find time to be together, time to be with family, to play, relax, collaborate on daily living, and to nurture one another and yourself. I recommend you take a look at your schedule and ask yourself where you can create some time for the project of improving your relationship.
- Another necessary compromise is emotional comfort. You will need to go out on a limb, try new things, challenge yourself to think differently or act differently, listen and be curious rather than interrupting, speak up rather than becoming resentfully compliant or withdrawing, and take a look at ways you might not be living your values as well as at the consequences of your actions. At the beginning, this may feel very uncomfortable.
- Couple therapy requires a substantial amount of energy. Sustained change requires considerable effort in both remembering your goals, and choosing to do something differently than before, again and again. As we work together you will become aware of what things you want to do to make your relationship stronger. Some common examples are to be more respectful, more giving, more appreciative, share more deeply, manage emotional responses carefully, and listen more responsively.
- Managing your own emotional responses to problems is crucial, and also often quite difficult for some people. For example, if one partner is hypersensitive to criticism, and the other is hypersensitive to feeling ignored, it will take effort on the part of each partner to stay grounded and less reactive (hypersensitive), rather than hoping their partner will stop ignoring or criticizing.

Couple Therapy Concepts

Attitude is key. When it comes to improving your relationship, your increasingly skillful, loving, and respectful responses toward your partner are more important than what decisions get made or actions taken.

Thinking differently about a problem is often more effective than trying to problem-solve about what action to take. Could you make the goal to deeply and respectfully discuss many possible solutions rather than “trying to win” or “get your way”?

Teamwork is when people work together and achieve more than they could achieve if they were alone. In a couple relationship, you are much more likely to thrive if you work together. For instance, if you want your partner to change, can you find the courage to wonder what you could do to make it **easier** for them to change? If you can, you are MUCH more likely to see your partner change. Have you ever been part of a team with a really inspiring leader? If you make it easy, fun, hopeful, and emotionally safe for your partner to take a risk, they are much more likely to do so. If you reward all attempts with kindness, you will reap huge rewards in how quickly change happens.

Curiosity is worth cultivating: curiosity about why you respond the way you do, what is going on for your partner, why this issue gets under your skin so deeply, and why that happens for your partner. The world looks different to everyone. Curiosity is the route to empathy. Without empathy, partnership is hollow.

Listening is not the same as agreeing. When you listen, you are not signing a contract to abandon your position. **Empathy** is not the same as agreeing. You can be kind, loving, truly “get” why your partner feels how they do, even be able to join in that depth of feeling, and still not agree.

Sharing what you think, feel, believe, and prefer can bring you closer to your partner. Your partner can't appreciate what they don't know about you.

How you share has a big impact on your partner's ability to stay present, listen well, and be curious about your viewpoint. You have a right to feel heard, and so do they. You also both have a responsibility to use self-control and not include a jab with your communication. Until you can do that, you can hardly blame them for not listening attentively.

Kindness and good manners go a very long way. Can you legitimately expect your partner to treat you better than you treat them? Can you legitimately expect your partner to change in a highly critical environment? Kindness to yourself also counts; it can be very challenging to be around someone you love who is beating themselves up. If that describes you, some radical self-care may be in order.

Lost in translation: it's not what you say, it's what they hear. Sometimes a communication misfires due to interpretation. This is normal; we all interpret things differently. Cultivate curiosity, and figure out what your partner heard; then simply clear up the misunderstanding. Think of it as a language barrier.

Fixing what is wrong is only one part of the solution; building something wonderful is the greater part. Making time and finding inspiration to build something wonderful or move toward a shared vision of the relationship you are building together is not optional, and it will get you through many hard times.

Focus on changing yourself, not your partner. The success of your couple therapy depends on you having more goals for yourself than for your partner. I'm at my best when I help you reach your own objectives.

Limited responses are a big of the problem for most couples. Your partner is quite limited in their ability to respond to you, and you are quite limited in your ability to respond to your partner. Accepting this is difficult, but a huge step into maturity.

Flawed assumptions about your partner's motives will block you from seeing their good intentions. People have difficulty taking risks or changing behaviors when the people around them have no faith in them or believe they don't mean well. Consider whether it might benefit you to give your partner the benefit of the doubt when it comes to their motives.

Contradictions abound in relationships. For instance, you probably can't speak your mind and also keep the peace. If you always play it safe emotionally, you will pay for it by building a dull relationship. Juiciness, excitement, and interest depend on our differences.

Trust is created by doing what you say you will do. That is built upon the sometimes difficult foundational skill of only agreeing to what you actually want and intend to follow through on.

Underneath *that* is creating an atmosphere in your relationship where your partner can be honest with you about their preferences and intentions without being punished for it. And beneath THAT is actively co-creating an emotionally safe partnership, which is ultimately the foundation of trust.

Practice will be necessary. Imagine expecting to compete well in a sport or play a complicated piece on an instrument without any practice! Relationships are just as sophisticated and complex, but we expect ourselves (and our partners) to excel with virtually no practice. Plan to practice, and plan to be kind with your partner's early efforts at change.

Emotional Boundaries are essential. You can only change yourself. You can influence and be influenced, but you can't actually change anyone but yourself. Fortunately, after years of working with distressed relationships, I can tell you that **becoming a more effective partner is the most efficient way to change a relationship**. Good news, right? You have more power to create change than you thought.

Self-respect is something you can create for yourself if you live in accordance with your values. You are responsible for your words and actions, no matter how others treat you.

Disappointment and brain physiology work together to create challenges. When reality doesn't line up with our hopes or expectations, we feel disappointed and often resentful, and our brain guards against further disappointment by blaming any and all forces outside ourselves, including our partner. *This aspect of human nature is what keeps therapists in business.* You can change your relationship by improving your response to problems. You can change how you think about the current problem, how you feel about it, and how choose what to do about it. Very few people want to focus on that, because it requires time, energy, and holding yourself accountable, even when you really don't want to.

Most of the ineffective things we do in relationships fall into just a few categories:

- Blaming or attempting to dominate
- Disengagement/withdrawal
- Complying resentfully
- Whining
- Denying or becoming confused

These are normal emotional reactions to feeling a threat or high stress. Improving your relationship means better management of these reactions. It is hard, because your brain is wired to defend yourself from perceived danger. You can still manage your responses better, and it gets easier with practice.

In the words of my mentor, Pete Pearson:

"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."

Communication

Difficulty communicating is the #1 presenting problem in couples counseling.

Good communication is much harder than most people want to believe. Effective negotiation is even harder. Both are necessary for a strong, thriving, interesting long-term relationship.

The three most important skills for effective communication are respect, openness, and warm persistence.

Strong communication in a relationship requires everyone to reflect on their own thoughts and feelings and get curious about their partner's. Both partners need to be able to speak from the heart about what matters to them. Both need to have the experience of feeling heard and understood. This is not the same as agreeing.

We are all responsible for how we express ourselves, no matter how others treat us. In order to be an effective communicator, you need to

- Manage unruly emotions, such as anger that is too intense, or hopelessness that leads to shutting down completely.
- Attend to how you are communicating. Avoid whining, blaming, being vague, manipulating, or sliding in a jab.
- Identify what you want from your partner during the discussion. It might be simply listening, kindness, or empathy, or it might be something else.
- Identify what the problem symbolizes to you.
- Consider how the problem gets under your skin. What is this about for you?
- Ask yourself about your beliefs and attitudes about the problem.
- Attend to your partner's major concerns.
- Give your partner the experience of feeling heard and understood.
- Ask yourself and your partner if the change you want is in accordance with your/their values.
- Consider how you can help your partner become more responsive to you.