

Interested in couples therapy? Couples therapy: The myths and the realities.

One of the valuable services therapists provide is couples therapy. This article will discuss what couples therapy is by reviewing the following: focusing on the process, why couples don't seek counseling right away, common myths about couples therapy and the realities, common stressors people are dealing with when they seek couples therapy, and who could benefit from couples therapy.

Couples therapy aims to identify repetitive, negative interaction cycles as a pattern and understand the source of reactive emotions that drive the pattern. Once that is accomplished, services focus on expanding and re-organizing key emotional responses in the relationship, facilitating a shift to new patterns of interaction, creating new and positively bonding emotional events in the relationship, fostering a secure attachment between partners, and maintaining a sense of intimacy. Common core principles of relationship counseling and couples therapy include respect, empathy, tact, consent, confidentiality, accountability, expertise, evidence-based certification, and ongoing training.

Couples are often too afraid to seek treatment because they think the focus will be on identifying blame for all the problems in the relationship. Some worry if they go to therapy they will be labeled as "crazy." Also, there is still a stigma when people say they are going to counseling especially couples. Couples may not seek counseling because they don't think the concern is a "big deal" or they say to themselves "I can handle it on my own." Often times when this happens, they ignore or dismiss the concern and don't seek help for example until the issue of divorce comes up or a partner gives an ultimatum. "We try couples counseling or I am leaving and done with this relationship." Many times when couples come in to session, the issue/issues could have happened years ago without ever being addressed and continue to affect all aspects of the couples life. We as therapists and advocates need to continue to address these worries and bring more awareness to these types of concerns.

In addition to barriers, many myths and misconceptions about couples therapy exist. Here are three common myths about couples counseling and their realities.

Myth #1 The therapist is going to take sides.

If a person thinks the therapist is going to take sides or get blamed for all the problems in the relationship, they are going to be less likely to seek counseling. Couples therapy is a team effort. The therapist is there to be a non-judgmental third party to help guide and mediate the situation but the couple needs to do the work which includes showing up to appointments, being on time, allowing and being open to change, doing any "homework" that is assigned from the therapist, and being patient and giving it some time to name a few.

Myth #2 Couples therapy is only going to focus on my childhood.

Most couples therapists focus on the here and now. Most couples didn't know each other when they were children. That is not to say talking about the childhood is not important and will not be brought up in therapy, but, couples therapists mainly focus on the present, the concerns at hand, healing, seeing patterns whether through the couples past and making connections or current

patterns that need to be addressed, change to bring about, and what lies ahead for the future with the couple.

Myth #3 Couples therapy doesn't help.

Most couples come to counseling in crisis mode. Couples counseling is the last resort because all other things the couple tried didn't work. Most of the time, the issue/concern has been brewing for years and many often want a "quick fix" to all their concerns. The issue/concern didn't happen overnight; it will not get resolved in a day. A lot of couples are frustrated, upset, and overwhelmed when they come in to services which can lead to a negative view or attitude toward counseling in general and effect treatment and outcome. Counseling is a process and takes time.

There are many common themes or issues/ concerns that cause couples to come into counseling to address. The most common theme is financial difficulties. There are also struggles with trust and infidelity. Couples who are middle-aged often have the most stress because they are dealing with young children and aging parents at the same time. Another concern in couples therapy is sexual issues whether it be a lack of intimacy or a physical problem. In-laws and family issues are a major concern and often dealt with in couples therapy. Communication issues is also a major theme in couples counseling, which can include criticism, stonewalling, defensiveness, and contempt. All of the communication issues can damage a relationship. Many couples deal with things in life differently based on the way they grew up or their philosophy on life. As long as a couple is open-minded, willing to put an effort in, and do the work, there is always hope for change.

When people hear of couples therapy, they often think it is just between a married man and woman but this is just not the case. Couple therapy is for any significant relationship in a person's life. It can be between a married man and woman but it is also for co-habiting couples, homosexual couples, non-fertile couples, couples with children, couples with infidelity concerns, and couples that are adopting. Again, it is any significant relationship. They do not have to be dating or a romantic couple. Couples therapy could also include friends that have become distant, a mother and son, or a father and daughter relationship for example. Relationships are difficult and require effort. With the help counselor or therapist, many relationships can be improved and strengthened.

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