

Couples Therapy Helps Many Problem Relationships

The conscious and unconscious expectations we live with in coupled relationships are all too often mythical and very far from reality! Couples can, unfortunately, get into a great deal of difficulty with each other when these myths rule their relationships.

Anger over unmet and unrealistic needs then arises and escalates. Often couples sink deeper and deeper into trouble with little or no understanding as to why things are going wrong. Each blames the other, feels unappreciated, unheard and unloved. There is a pervasive feeling of failure. Yet most of the time the love and connection is still viable, though buried under debris.

Perhaps an understanding of what couples therapy is and what it can do would be of some help to those of us who are thinking of taking the step of seeking help for a problem relationship. In the first place, we can and should expect that the therapist will be able to empathize with our pain and confusion in a human way as well as be fair and knowledgeable.

Being fair, however, does not mean the therapist does not confront each partner's distorted ideas and expectations. That is a very important part of the process. But it should be done with tact and consideration for why we feel as we do, even if our feelings are not reasonable in any given situation. The purpose is not to puncture already shaky self-esteem but to understand what has gone wrong, why it's gone wrong, and what can be done to repair the damage.

One partner may have a legitimate gripe in one area but not in another. Both partners, to add to the complexity, can often be right and wrong all at the same time! Moreover, the therapist should communicate his or her understanding in a direct clear-cut way with a delineation of specific, prioritized problem areas to be worked on. It is then the place of the partners to agree, disagree, and rearrange priorities, etc. until all three parties have arrived at a mutually acceptable contract.

Then the real business of the therapy begins. There are six basic areas in couple's relations that need to be worked through in treatment:

- **Confrontation of Reality** - puncturing myths, defining and understand "old stuff"
- **Communication**- saying what's really on one's mind.
- **Conflict Resolution** – how to fight and fight fair.
- **Compromise** – Yes! That dirty word.
- **Carefulness** –as I like to think of it – care-ful-ness.
- **Commitment** – deepening levels of intimacy and closeness.

Confrontation of reality is vital. The therapist, as a more impartial observer, will be able to see where each partner has brought mythical expectations and help clarify them. This almost certainly involves old stuff. And as old stuff emerges, it often becomes clear that either one or both partners have many fears of closeness, despite their wishes for it. There is often a push-pull momentum that develops in a relationship. One partner wants to be closer; the other pulls away. The first partner then becomes hurt and angry and withdraws. Whereupon the second partner moves closer, only to withdraw in a non-accusatory way is a must.

Communication, when both partners are ready to hear and be heard is vital. A mutual sorting through of each partner's needs and wishes and how realistic and important they are to that person and how they affect the other is essential. When a realistic and fair appraisal has been made through fair fighting, the stage is set for compromise. Compromise has gotten a bum rap in a society in which we are encouraged to believe we can "have it all". In reality, there is no good relationship of any kind "without compromise. However, often in a relationship one partner, frequently the woman gets the role of being the compromiser. This is extremely unhealthy for a relationship. This does not mean that all compromises are always 50-50 at any given moment. But it does mean that no compromise costs one partner too much, and that over a period of time, there is a natural balance that both partners feels is a good one.

Implicit in all that has been discussed is a growing sense of **carefulness** on the part of each partner towards the other and towards the relationship between them. This is a concept diametrically opposed to another societal norm that has developed – "letting it all hang out." Carefulness is a part of caring – being full of care for the other. No one can feel truly loved if care for his or her feelings, wishes and needs is not taken. This means that we do not have the right to speak or act abusively. Of course, we are all human and will overstep the boundaries at times. But we should be very clear that we have overstepped them and that resultant guilt is quite realistic and healthy. Anger, especially, should be handled with care as it can do great and lasting damage to a relationship, if uncontained.

If the process of couple's therapy is successful, then partners invariably come to develop greater self-esteem and greater esteem for the partner. The underbrush of old stuff is cleared away enough so that the real, present relationship can thrive properly. A greater sense of connectedness and mutual trust develops and with it, deeper **commitment**. Partners can reveal deeper levels of their emotional lives without fear of being made fun of or rejected.

A fuller and happier sexual life often develops, as well as greater contentment in general.

There is no guarantee that couples therapy will be successful for every couple who seeks help. Sometimes, very sadly, the best help a therapist can give is to help a couple separate, so that each can go on with his or her own life in a better way. There is also no doubt, however, that couple's therapy can dramatically change the whole downward course of a relationship and help partners to recapture or even find for the first time a true sense of joy in being together.