

I'm in Couple Therapy...Myself

Ideally, for a couple to work on their marriage relationship it is best to have both partners coming in to therapy. But that doesn't always happen. There are times when one spouse cannot convince his or her partner to join him or her, and at those times one partner ends up in my office alone. What then? Can couple therapy be done with one partner?

Sara was aware of feeling very criticized by her husband. He tended to point out the very thing that hadn't been done yet or wasn't done right when he came home from work at the end of the day. He was quick to comment negatively on her driving. Her patience for tolerating this much criticism was wearing thin, and she found herself snapping at him and then withdrawing into a cold silence. Sara was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with her marriage, and we could assume that her husband shared a similar experience. However, he was not willing to come into couple therapy. Sara asked in our first session, "Will therapy help if I come in alone?" The answer to this question came with time. Sara now knows that her individual therapy sessions have helped; they've helped her individually and in her marriage.

Couples engage in cycles of interaction. Interactions that feel good become positive cycles. Interactions that are conflictual and leave partners feeling distant are often self-perpetuating negative cycles. How we hear or perceive our partner determines what we think which influences what we feel. What we feel often determines what we do. A couple's interaction can be likened to a dance. Dance steps are determined by music, which in the case of relationships are one's emotions. We feel something, then we do something. A common cycle in relationships begins when we perceive hurt and is then followed with instinctive attack or withdrawal, two knee-jerk reactions that ensure distance rather than closeness and perpetuates a cycle of hurt and misunderstanding. The power to change a negative cycle lies in changing how we hear and understand our partner, and how we respond when we feel hurt. This is what couple therapy targets.

In session, Sara was able to identify why her husband spoke to her so critically. She understood it was his anxiety. Working hard and balancing the financial needs of the family was a huge strain. When he anticipates waste, carelessness or ineffectiveness, he is triggered to feel anxiety. We would have helped her husband describe his experience if he were coming to sessions but since he wasn't. Sara intuited what she thought may be going on for him. Sara developed a new lens from which to hear and understand what her husband was saying when he sounded critical. The thought that it was not that she was doing something wrong when he spoke to her critically, but was experiencing his own distress, enabled her to feel compassion. After all they were in the same financial boat, and his caring and hard work was something from which she benefited. This more compassionate and understanding thinking created an alternative response. No longer did she require her knee-jerk protective stance of defending herself by verbally attacking or withdrawing, now she was more likely to respond with, "I know this upsets you. I will try to stop." Or with problem solving "If the mess in the house is unnerving to you then we can..." whatever that solution may look like.

Once Sara showed understanding as to where her husband was coming from and began to respond to him more sensitively, his response to her changed. He was soothed, felt calmer and this translated into his being less critical. In a dance, when one person changes their steps, the other is forced to follow or toes end up getting stubbed. So too in the marriage “dance”. As one person works on him- or herself and subsequently grows and changes their reactions, it is likely that the other spouse will also change his or her sequence of reacting and responding.

To work on a marriage, it is preferable that couples come in to therapy together. Hopefully they can then work on gaining insights into their cycle of interaction, into themselves and their partner. Emotional safety, connection and intimacy are enhanced through understanding the layers of actions and reactions, that “dance” that goes on between couples. However, for those times when only one partner is ready to come in, it is possible to be in couple therapy alone and improve one’s marriage.

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