



Making the Most of Marriage Therapy

Jana Darrington, MS, Utah State University Extension

Naomi Brower, MFHD, CFLE, Utah State University Extension

Eric Walker, Ph.D., Utah State University Extension Intern

All relationships experience change over time (Larson, 2003). Even the strongest relationships can often benefit from a skilled a marriage counselor to help to smooth over the rough patches in their relationship. While the needs of relationships vary, some common ingredients are useful for couples seeking to improve their relationship through marriage therapy. Knowing four of these important elements and how to apply them can help couples get the most out of marriage therapy.

1. Evaluate your marriage's strengths and weaknesses. During times of challenge and distress, it can be difficult to accurately evaluate the relationship, recognize why problems keep happening, and understand how both partners can perceive the same marriage so differently. It may be easier to identify weaknesses and harder to detect strengths and resources, but a balanced assessment of strengths and weaknesses is important for the couple and therapist to create an accurate plan of treatment (Snyder, Ritschel, Rand, & Berg, 2006).

While therapists may use a variety of evaluation tools to identify strength and weakness such as self-evaluations, written assessments and therapist interviews, the best and most important resource is you, the couple. Therapists have been trained to help couples work through their struggles; but without the honest information provided by the couple, it would be impossible for the therapist to make sense of the current problems and identify the steps to promote healing, strengthening and improvement (Beck & Crawford, 2000).

2. Know what goals you want to work on.

Establishing realistic and clear goals for marriage therapy helps the healing and growing process (Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004; Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). Some of the common reasons for going to a marriage therapist include communication problems, decreased feelings of love towards a spouse, or because they love their spouse or children and want to improve the marriage relationship for their sake (Doss et al., 2004). Other reasons are less frequently reported but are also common and appropriate to address in marriage therapy, such as sexual intimacy problems or mild couple violence (Doss et al., 2004; Simpson, Atkins, Gattis, & Christensen, 2008). It is normal for spouses to disagree on reasons for participating in marriage therapy. Sharing all reasons with the therapist will help establish appropriate therapy goals (Doss et al., 2004). In order to achieve the goals, couples will then need to implement the remaining two components of effective counseling (Fowers, 2000).

3. Identify the changes you can make to become a better spouse. A willingness to change is an important ingredient to successful marriage therapy experiences (Whisman et al., 1997). While the specific changes vary among individuals, there are several qualities commonly found in strong marriages. These qualities include commitment, loyalty, being able to cope constructively with emotions, forgiveness, earning forgiveness, focusing on your spouse's strengths and qualities, making your spouse's welfare a priority, friendship,

and teamwork (Fowers, 2000; Gottman & Silver, 1999). As you identify changes you can make to support this list of qualities, you will be well on your way to becoming a better spouse and creating a better marriage.

It may be difficult to focus on changing yourself when you know of changes your spouse needs to make. While one spouse's characteristics and behaviors do affect the other spouse's experience in marriage (sometimes called partner affects), the biggest influence on your own experience in marriage is actually your own characteristics and behaviors (Holman et al., 2001). The good news is that you have most control over changing yourself, and focusing your energy on being your best self can have a great effect on your overall marriage relationship.

4. Hard work. Contrary to a common theme in entertainment, love does not conquer all (Fowers, 2000). However, the hard work and effort that you put into your marriage now can result in more feelings of love and a better quality marriage down the road (Fowers, 2000; Gottman & Silver, 1999; Halford, Lizzio, Wilson, & Occhipinti, 2007; and Whisman et al., 1997). Committing to the hard work necessary to improve the relationship can be especially challenging when feelings of love are low and conflict and power struggles are high (Whisman et al., 1997), but the long term payoff is worth it. While substantial and lasting changes take time, some immediate relief is possible by knowing the relationship is moving in a positive direction.

Remember, while strengthening your marriage, it is normal for the positive feelings of love, happiness and satisfaction to come and go, as will the less pleasant counterparts; but your choice of commitment and efforts to change and grow can be constant. Furthermore, as you strengthen your marriage, you will likely find that feelings of love and happiness will grow out of your hard work (Fowers, 2000).

Seeking a Qualified Marriage Therapist

While couples' therapy can be beneficial for many couples, it is also important to keep in mind that not all counselors are created equal (Doherty, 2002; Doherty, 1999). Some therapists are not trained specifically in couples counseling and may

unintentionally create more problems in the relationship. Others may undermine the relationship through their approach in helping couples. In order to choose a therapist who will best help you, consider asking some of the following questions to learn about a therapist's training and value orientation prior to meeting with him or her (Doherty, 1999).

1. What is the counselor's background and training in marital therapy? And, what percentage of their practice is marital therapy? If the counselor was trained through a workshop or was self-taught or if they focus most of their time on individual therapy, consider going to someone else.
2. What is the counselor's attitude toward salvaging a struggling marriage versus helping the couple break up? Because those seeking therapy generally want to work on strengthening their marriage, it is best to look for a therapist who is supportive of marriage as an institution and wants to help strengthen the existing relationship if at all possible. So, if the therapist says they are "neutral" in their approach, try to help people meet their own needs, or don't believe divorce is an option, consider looking elsewhere.
3. What is the percentage of couples who work with the counselor who work through their problems and stay married? Break up? Do not improve? If the therapist states that 100 percent stay together or that staying together isn't a measure of success, consider finding another counselor.

Conclusion

While meeting with a skilled marriage therapist can be helpful in strengthening a marriage, the couple greatly influences the effectiveness of the marriage therapy experience. An effective therapist can provide a framework to help couples work on their relationship, but the couple is ultimately in charge and has great influence in the goals, changes and outcomes based on their level of commitment and effort. By recognizing their own influence and importance, couples can take the lead in creating a

satisfying and rewarding relationship that can last a lifetime.

References

Beck, R. L., & Crawford, A. B. (2000). The couple assessment summary: A bridge from assessment to treatment. *American Journal of Psychotherapy, 54*, 55-66.

Doherty, W. (2002). Bad couples therapy, How to avoid it. *Psychotherapy Networker*. Retrieved from <http://www.smartmarriages.com/badcouples.doherty.html>.

Doherty, W. (1999, July). How therapy can be hazardous to your marital health. Keynote address presented at Smart Marriages Conference, Arlington, Virginia. Retrieved from <http://www.smartmarriages.com/hazardous.html>.

Doss, B. D., Simpson, L. E., & Christensen, A. (2004). Why do couples seek marital therapy? *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 35*, 608-614.

Fowers, B. J. (2000). *Beyond the myth of marital happiness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Halford, W. K., Lizzio, A., Wilson, K. L., & Occhipinti, S. (2007). Does working at your marriage help? Couple relationship self-regulation and satisfaction in the first 4 years of marriage. *Journal of Family Psychology, 21*, 185-194.

Holman, et al., (2001). *Premarital prediction of marital quality or breakup: Research, theory, and practice*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.

Larson, J.H. (2003). *The great marriage tune-up manual*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Simpson, L. E., Atkins, D. C., Gattis, K. S., & Christensen, A. (2008). Low-level relationship aggression and couple therapy outcomes. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22*, 102-111.

Snyder, C. R., Ritschel, L. A., Rand, K. L., & Berg, C. J. (2006). Balancing Psychological assessments: Including strengths and hope in client reports. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 62*, 33-46.

Whisman, M. A., Dixon, A. E., & Johnson, B. (1997). Therapists' perspectives of couple problems and treatment issues in couple therapy. *Journal of Family Psychology, 11*, 361-366

Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran's status. USU's policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decision.

Utah State University employees and students cannot, because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status, refuse to hire; discharge; promote; demote; terminate; discriminate in compensation; or discriminate regarding terms, privileges, or conditions of employment, against any person otherwise qualified. Employees and students also cannot discriminate in the classroom, residence halls, or in on/off campus, USU-sponsored events and activities.

This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Noelle E. Cockett, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University.