

Couples Therapy: A New Understanding of Each Other

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The purpose of this article is to help couples prevent and identify common communication errors and negative behaviors. Treatment suggestions are intended to encourage a couple's participation in therapy. Situations are illustrated by fictional couples, giving the reader a three-dimensional view of everyday people to which they can relate. Essential building blocks such as trust, respect, empathy, and friendship are the foundation of the article. The article is based on clinical experiences of both authors, with supporting references by Erik Erikson and J.M. Gottman.

Starting Out

“Give and Take”

Did you trade-off being free when you said, “I do?” Are responsibilities overpowering you in your marriage? We will describe some questions a couple would bring to our therapy office in the following article.

Tammy and Mike are in a committed relationship and Mike has recently brought up the idea of becoming engaged. While Tammy is extremely attracted to Mike and deeply cares for him, she is worried about the added responsibility of his seven-year-old daughter, Nikki, who remains in his custody. Never married, Tammy has enjoyed the freedom of living alone and not having to make adjustments to another person. Mike is quite aware of Tammy's discomfort and asks nothing of Tammy with regard to Nikki. He fears that any requests for Tammy's assistance or support will drive her away, while Tammy continues to fear the adjustment.

Tammy loves her freedom and worries about having to answer to someone. She's afraid to admit to Mike for fear he would walk away. Tammy questions, “Does this mean I'll be alone the rest of my life?” Does Tammy need to give up total freedom to get something else in

return? Does she know the cloak of independence that she wears covers up her loneliness underneath?

Mike adores Tammy and refers to her as his “whole world.” He feels slighted when Tammy makes plans to go out with her friends, weekly. Does Mike need to build his inner world and strengthen his self-esteem? Is he willing to take the risk that Tammy may want to learn the full spectrum of giving? Interventions with this couple would involve sacrifices from both Tammy and Mike to support each other in the relationship. Tammy will lend a hand with Nikki and Mike will be accepting that time with friends is important to Tammy’s well being, identity, and the integrity of the relationship.

The following are some suggestions for this couple:

- Do not assume what the other person wants.
- Placing limits on each other may not be helpful.
- Consider each other’s fears.
- Welcome each other’s need for individual time.
- Accepting personal growth enriches the marriage.

Psychotherapists welcome young adults encountering these difficulties in their early relationships. Intimacy can interfere with their own identities. Couples often seek help for flawed relationships. Some have lost their sense of individuality in overly-dependent relationships. Here, two people literally function as one. Others experience a breach of trust when secrets are uncovered. Some secrets might be an addiction or an extra-marital affair.

Trust, respect, and feeling are all necessary ingredients for any successful relationship. To accept oneself leads to accepting another. This happens in a smooth-working partnership. With strengths present, two people can learn to accept each other’s flaws. They can take issue

with one another and express individual differences, but return to a meeting place of mutuality and sharing. At times, compromise may be the solution.

“Legacy”

Do you ever find it hard to escape? Are you afraid of too much to handle and too many people to please? Have you lost yourself in your marriage? We will explore the lives of two people and their families, not unlike a couple who may seek our services at Atlantic Counseling.

Laurie and Rick are engaged and are planning a summer wedding. Rick comes from a large family and is second oldest of eight siblings. Laurie has a brother, eight years her senior, residing out-of-state. Her mother has been widowed for three years and lives alone.

With the declining health of Mom and Dad, Rick is assuming an increasing responsibility in the family. His family counts on him, as well, to spend four weeks at their summer cottage, so everyone can be together. Laurie feels bombarded and overwhelmed by everyone and their demands. She feels that she and Rick may lose each other.

The therapist would help Rick to become more aware of his needs as well as his family's; perhaps, by sharing his sibling's abilities to help Mom and Dad. Expectations of Rick would have to be re-negotiated in the family because of the new marriage and new life. Now, they can be themselves in their own families and thriving partners in their new marriage.

Laurie could lessen her fear and open her heart to Rick's place in life. Laurie and Rick will help her Mom belong to their growing family with a backyard cookout. A warm relationship between the Moms and Dads will open the door to “new sons” and “new daughters.” In the safety of couple's therapy, Laurie and Rick would find gentle support in their new lives.

The following are some suggestions for the couple:

- Bring families together regularly - Birthdays, holidays, religious events.
- Enhance family relationships with common interests.
- Reach couple fulfillment in belonging.
- Find a balance of family and couple time.
- Reserve energy to fuel the marriage.

Individuals will take a journey in search of identity, friendship, and belonging. This is the foundation for a healthy, growing young adult. This will be a path which will lead to mature love if a positive sense of oneself is formed. Treatment will nurture a “self-love” leading to a development of “mature love.”

The seeds are planted for self-love in early childhood. These and other factors play a role in laying the groundwork for a healthy marriage. The industrious and creative young person may later grow into an enthusiastic adult who offers positive energy to a relationship. Imagine if the sense of industry turns into a rather mean-spirited competitiveness. The need to win is later played out in adulthood during power struggles in a marriage.

“Finding Each Other”

Do you ever feel like you are working so hard and missing what is really important in your marriage? We will take a look at patterns of a couple who find themselves struggling with emptiness in their marriage.

Jackie and Tim are motivated young professionals. The couple has been married five years and lives alone. Tim can get away from work periodically, but Jackie finds the majority of her time consumed by a hectic and demanding job. She has worked hard to climb the corporate ladder and is not confident that others will meet her standard of perfection if she

were away. Tim feels last on the priority list. He misses her companionship. Treatment will involve dialogue and planning. For example, how much of Jackie's confidence depends on her work? Does Tim take the initiative to reach out to Jackie? Do you remember a time when life was less complicated? The value of time Jackie and Tim spend together will foster the return of the warmth and closeness in the relationship.

The following are some suggestions for the couple:

- Do not lose sight of each other's needs.
- Have fun and find balance in your life.
- Want more for yourselves and each other.
- Communicate feelings often with each other.
- Keep the connection.

Making It Work

As seen, with Jackie and Tim, their needs are unexposed and unmet. To speak of feelings – past, present, and future – is a part of therapy. Communication patterns from the couple's past will influence the present. When work is unfolding in a treatment session a deep respect is needed for each other's history. The therapist may work in helping the couple fulfill their unmet needs. This will include the couple's participation in session and at home. For example, a spouse may think that finding a solution and winning an argument is all that is needed. However, this may be a sign of a larger need to be recognized.

Once needs are more clearly expressed, accepting each other's behaviors becomes easier. Positive thinking in relationships may include the ability to accept each other's behavior. Thinking in the present moment helps to understand a behavior, rather than acting to trigger a

negative one. This happens when an individual is willing to tackle the issue rather than feeling a reflex behavior (defenses). The quality of your relationship can improve with certain expressions of “I” and certain expressions of “you” with the understanding that “we” evolve.

Sometimes couples treatment can focus on the loss of friendship in the relationship and the need to accept each other. With this, a greater awareness can emerge. In allowing for individuality, the couple will often diminish the need for defending oneself. Fulfilling a strong sense of identity and connection will gradually decrease the competitive nature of a relationship in trouble.

Getting Along

Individuals in relationships often fear that their partner is not listening to them – that they are not being heard. Because this leads to a diminished self-worth, it is one leading cause of communication breakdown in relationships. Communication will improve by identifying and correcting some commonly known defenses and behaviors found between couples (Gottman, Schwartz & DeClaire, 2006). One example, may be, the tendency to patronize a spouse when not fully hearing her/him.

Opportunities for growth will become clear as these defenses and behaviors are identified. For example, complaining is commonly used to resolve a couple’s conflict. This, without realizing, often leads to criticism, destroying an individual’s self-worth and deepening the original conflict. Another response often used by many in conflict can be identified as common defensiveness. Defending oneself may not always be necessary with both partners having positive self-esteem. By using the ability to understand, rather than to defend, an individual will gain a valuable new perspective for themselves and will strengthen the relationship for each other.

These are behaviors which psychotherapists identify as negative hallmarks in the communication process. One such observation may be a partner's report of a purposeful insult. As an indication of contempt for each other, under these circumstances the psychotherapist would help to further develop friendship and a meaningful self-worth between the couple. Lastly, an individual may trigger another's anger by not responding at all. Commitment to the relationship and mutual love may be a question for the couple at this time.

Under the best circumstances, both individuals are responsible for miscommunication styles. One or the other may trigger a defense, the other may respond by over-reacting. The couple, at heart, is vulnerable. Each partner shows a need to be with the other just by being present in couple therapy. Be gentle with yourselves! You have a genuine and loving interest in each other.

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