



CALGARY COUPLES
Counselling Centre



How To Get The Most From Couples Counselling



By Nathan Cobb, Ph.D. in MFT, R. Psych, RMFT





How To Get The Most From Couples Counselling

Welcome to Couples Therapy

Thank you for choosing us! The purpose of this report is to clarify what you might expect from couples counselling at the Calgary Couples Counselling Centre and to help you get the most out of our work together.

Objectives of Couples Therapy

The main objectives of couples' therapy include the following:

- Becoming clear on your goals about how you aspire to be as a partner, and how you want your relationship to improve.
- Being able to clearly identify and map out the underlying negative patterns of responding to each other that fuel contention between you or that lead you to feel less unified and connected.
- Learning what you do personally that contributes to these negative patterns.
- Learning how to change these negative patterns. Therapy is effective only to the extent that it helps you to interrupt ineffective patterns of relating to each other and to create new ones that help you to feel closer, more hopeful, more like a team, and to manage your differences more effectively.
- Increasing self-awareness, which is specifically about:
 - Increasing self-knowledge of the full range of your emotions, and of your needs and wants in the relationship,
 - Understanding more clearly how your current behavior is influenced by things like your learning history, your beliefs and your needs, and your emotions, and
 - Articulating your desires and needs more fully to each other.
- Increasing your knowledge of your partner's emotions, wants and needs, and understanding more clearly how their learning history, beliefs and needs influences their current behavior.
- Learning how to communicate more openly and authentically with each other, and with more vulnerability.
- Learning how to connect and to meet each other's emotional needs more fully.



Realistic Expectations of Therapy

It is important to enter couples therapy with realistic expectations of the process. Some of these include the following:

1. Change requires time, focus and effort.

Couples therapy is not a quick fix in one, two or even three sessions. Simply put, to get from where you are now to where you want to be in a thriving, satisfying relationship requires a significant investment of time and effort. You may be experiencing several complex issues that need time to be discussed and worked through. You will likely need time to develop new skills, perspectives and attitudes that will help promote a healthy relationship. Developing new attitudes, perspectives and skills is not something that can be rushed. It takes a lot of conscious effort to interrupt ingrained negative patterns, and to practice putting in place new, more helpful patterns of interacting.

2. Change starts with you.

One of the first shifts in perspective that we hope you will adopt, if you have not already done so, is that change starts with you. Coming to couples' therapy to get your partner to change is setting yourself up for a lot of frustration. As much as you may want to at times, you cannot change your partner's attitudes or behaviors, nor even can your therapist directly change your partner. Only your partner can change your partner and only you can change you.

Although you cannot change your partner, what you can change is how you respond to the challenges that you face. You may be upset that your partner ignores you. How do you react when your partner does that? You may be upset that your partner drinks too much alcohol. What do you do when that happens? You may feel that your partner is too critical or judgmental of you. How do you respond to the criticism? As marriage therapist Brent Barlow put it, come to therapy with "a mirror rather than a magnifying glass."

A strong and successful relationship requires a conscious effort from each person to change their own reactions to each other, not merely to insist that the other person should just stop being so critical, or so demanding, or so self-centered, etc. If each of you will direct your energy toward what you really can work on—yourself—you will find that you get much better and faster results from therapy.

3. Couples therapy is not about blaming and pointing fingers.

Wanting to complain about your spouse to your therapist in couples counselling is normal. Almost all couples come to counseling with the desire to share their frustrations about what is not working well, and your partner is part of that somehow. People share their frustrations in counselling because they want to feel heard by their partner and by a relationship professional who can help. It is important that you tell your story and that you feel that someone has validated the negative impact of upsetting events that you have experienced in the relationship.

On the other hand, while it is important—indeed, necessary—for you to tell your story and to feel heard, one of the most damaging, and most common negative patterns that occurs in relationships consists of blaming each other for problems and accusing each other of wrong-doing. Sometimes, especially when both partners are feeling wronged and emotionally charged, each spouse tries to convince the therapist that the other person is the one at fault (or more at fault) or the one being unreasonable, and to offer up a lot of examples to prove this point. Couples can end up, as the actress Marlene Dietrich once said, "re-heating each other's sins and serving them up to each other for breakfast" (or in the therapist's office). This is counter-productive in therapy—ineffective at best, harmful at worst. If we followed this path in our time together it would result in both spouses feeling bad, worked up and frustrated



by the end of the appointment. One of the things that therapy can help you with is to learn to tell your story without falling into the trap of blaming or being judgmental, and to express your feelings and needs without being critical of your partner.

4. *Deciding on the direction therapy should take is a collaborative effort.*

Couples therapy works best when there is a lot of direction, and a collaborative mindset between us in setting agendas for each therapy session, and in deciding on a plan for treatment. The best scenario is one in which you are clear on what you want to accomplish, and your therapist offer tools, guidance, feedback and suggestions to help you achieve your objectives. You and your therapist can then decide together, collaboratively, on the goals of therapy and what to work on each session.

Therefore, it is important that you consider how you aspire to be as a partner, what situations you want to learn to handle differently, what outcome you want in your relationship, and how you want to shape your relationship for good in the future. You can best prepare for each upcoming appointment, by thinking about what you might want to work on or talk about in that session, and specifically how that topic or issue relates to your larger goals in therapy. Your therapist can use this information to guide the agenda and suggest adjustments as needed.

5. *Couples therapy is about establishing new patterns for the future and coming to terms with old patterns from the past.*

While it is important to move forward and not let the past hijack the present, couples do come to counselling with many old fights unresolved and still simmering on the back burner. Therapy strikes a balance between focusing on the future, moving forward with solutions, and helping you build your emotional bank account on the one hand, while revisiting some unresolved issues or rocky moments on the other hand. This “revisiting” must not merely be “going to court” to prove your case. We want to help you shift away from a pattern of “moving against each other” (or “moving away from each other”) over your issues, particularly if the way you frame your issues is that your problems exist inside your partner. We want to help you move the issues outside of each other, help you to move toward each other as allies, and tackle together the issues that you face as a couple. We hope you will have genuine intent to follow your therapist’s direction in guiding you through the skills needed to turn down the heat and to let go of hostility. Your therapist can coach you in these skills but cannot give you the right attitude to use them. This attitude consists of an open, committed, earnest desire to make things right between you and not merely just to prove your case or show that you are right.

In some relationships, turning down the heat of fighting is not so much the issue. Some couples don’t fight often at all. Instead, they keep their emotional distance from each other, engaging in polite small talk or conversing about logistics. In this case, we may need to turn up the heat a little, not the “heat” of accusations and blame, but rather the safe and respectful disclosure of previously unspoken thoughts, feelings and needs that have rarely been discussed openly. If you are numb and unsure of what you feel, we can work with you to help you become more aware of your inner world and that of your partner.

What To Expect From A Typical Session

Agenda Setting: The first 0-5 Minutes. Most sessions typically start with a follow-up on homework recommended from the previous week, or a quick re-cap of the highlights or events of the week. We will celebrate your successes or hear about your challenges. Your therapist may ask you for feedback about how the therapy process is going for you, what is working well, what is not working well, and any direction changes that are needed. Next, we tune in to any pressing issues that need addressing this session. Essentially, we decide together what will be worked on for the next forty minutes.



The Middle: 35-45 Minutes. This is the meat of the session. In the beginning stages of therapy, we often focus on uncovering and understanding the triggers and coping responses that form the back-and-forth negative “dance” you create together. This is the part where we explore underlying patterns of responding to each other and help you slow down your self-protective reactions to each other. As therapy progress, we focus on helping each of you to identify and disclose your emotional needs more fully and openly, and on learning to tune in to each other’s attachment-related emotions. In later sessions we also celebrate, consolidate and solidify positive changes by acknowledging them, discussing what made them possible, and exploring what difference they made to your connection with each other.

A middle-stage session might start with introducing a principle or an exercise that is directly related to your goals and objectives and asking you to work on the exercise with each other in the session. We might work on processing a rocky moment of the previous week that you wish to work out, or on learning to use a more vulnerable style of communicating with each other. The focus of the exercise will be tied to the agenda we set together. Your therapist will usually ask if there is anything you wish to discuss that session. If not, we can set an agenda together based on your overall goals and on observations of what could be improved.

As therapy progresses, your therapist will likely encourage you to talk more and more to each other during a session and will be active in coaching and intervening where necessary to help you change “the dance” of your interactions. If the session is about processing a rocky moment from the previous week, it will not be merely a rehashing of the fight. It will be for the purpose of helping you identify how you got off track, how to spot and interrupt negative habits and what to do to get back on track again. Your therapist will help you understand how the rocky moment ties in to underlying themes, emotional needs, and patterns in your relationship.

As you can see, couples’ therapy is idiosyncratic to the couple. It is not a cookbook, one-size-fits-all approach. Essentially, the focus is on whatever issues you bring in with you that are causing you distress and that need working on in that session. Your therapist will have many tools to help you accomplish your objectives and may not use every tool, for every couple, every time.

The Wrap-Up: 0-5 Minutes. This is the end of the session. It includes assigning homework for the coming week, getting clear on what you intend to work on for yourself between now and the next session, and/or asking you to re-cap what the session was about for you or what you learned in it.

What To Do After Your First Session

This next section is a partial answer to a question that nearly every couple asks at the end of the first introductory session: “What do we do now? Where do we go next?” If your therapist has not already suggested something for you to work on, or given some direction, the suggestions in this section may give you some ideas.



Before listing those suggestions, let me point out that some couples who seek relationship counselling already have a reasonably good relationship with each other and just need a “tune-up” in some areas of their life together. Following the suggestions below can help them begin to make significant and speedy improvements in their marriage, right away.

Other couples come to counselling with a variety of significant and painful issues that they are dealing with, some of which may have been going on for a long time. These can include betrayal and loss of trust, chronic aggressive conflict, addiction issues, physical or emotional abuse, lack of emotional and sexual intimacy, blended family and parenting conflicts, and significant financial pressures, among other issues. Couples therapy for this group of couples is typically multi-faceted and can involve many complex feelings. Such complexity cannot be adequately addressed by a list of general suggestions in a document like this one. Also, you may feel so hurt or frustrated that some of these suggestions might not feel possible to you right now. If so, that is okay. Take what makes sense to you now and leave the rest until you feel ready for them. Also, there are a lot of suggestions here. There is no need to feel like you have work on them all in the first week.

- Make a commitment to attend couples counselling regularly for the next few months. In most cases this will mean attending weekly at the beginning, until you have made some tangible progress, at which time the sessions can be spaced out less frequently.
- Self-help reading. There are numerous excellent books for couples about how to have a thriving marriage or relationship. We highly recommend using one of these books as an adjunct to therapy, including: John Gottman’s *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, Sue Johnson’s *Hold Me Tight and Love Sense*, or Stan Tatkin’s *Wired for Love*. An excellent book that is helpful for healing after infidelity is *After the Affair* by Janis Abrahms Spring.
- Be deliberate over the next week about building up each other’s emotional bank account on a daily basis. This is done by being thoughtful and considerate of each other in ways that help your spouse feel loved and significant to you. This might include smiling at each other more with your eyes. It might involve taking a moment to walk up to your spouse, look them in the eye and tell them something about them that you value or why you love them. Maybe your spouse wants to be touched more affectionately. In the morning, you might take a moment to stop and find out one thing that is going on in your spouse’s world that day and ask them about it later in the evening. At night, before going to bed, take ten minutes to catch up with each other about each other’s day before falling asleep.
- Change the balance of positivity to negativity. If there has been a lot of fighting and bickering between you lately, work on making a conscious decision to respond differently to your spouse, to respond with less negativity, and to make conscious efforts to fill up each other’s emotional bank account or “love bucket”. This is analogous to a patient who is bleeding out, needing someone to bind up their wounds so that the bleeding stops, and someone to give them a blood transfusion to replace what was lost. The “patient” in this case is your relationship.

One of John Gottman’s landmark studies with married couples showed that when couples disagree, those who are on the road to stable and thriving marriages display a ratio of five positive expressions toward their spouse for every negative one. Couples on the road to divorce display a ratio of just under one to one during a 15-minute dialogue about a conflict issue. Examples of too much negativity include blaming, criticism,



fault-finding, judging, lashing out, listing examples of your spouse's failures, name-calling, rolling your eyes (eye-rolling signals a dismissive, judgmental attitude), and belligerence. These types of negatives can very quickly upset the balance. And they are avoidable. Expressing your thoughts and feelings about a problem that is bothering you might fall on the negative side of that ratio because it can be uncomfortable for either of you to talk about. If you avoid making your spouse the bad guy, however, it is a "soft" negative—not destructive to your relationship, even necessary. However, the discussion you have about it still needs a lot of positive expressions to offset the negative. Even during conflict, you must work on increasing the positives in how you talk to your spouse by being respectful, kind, thoughtful, affirming, non-judgmental, and so on. Your therapist will help you to find ways to affirm each other's strengths.

- Stop the blame game. There are quite a few problems with blaming your partner for problems that arise. These include:
 - a. Blaming becomes part of the problem.
 - b. Nothing gets solved.
 - c. Blaming inhibits self-awareness.
 - d. There is nothing vulnerable and real about blaming.
- If your partner feels blamed for things, try to focus on expressing your feelings (not just your opinions) about whatever the situation is in a way that is authentic and vulnerable, acknowledge what you can improve about your own behavior in the relationship, and reflect on ways that improving your relationship is a team effort.
- If you need to bring up something that bothers you, start by affirming your spouse. Let them know what is good about them, what you appreciate about them. Find something positive to say first. Then avoid sounding critical of your spouse. Instead, try to describe what happened using neutral, non-judgmental language and express how it made you feel (emotionally). Then ask for what you want or what you would prefer.
- Spend time together. Go on a date or two. Spend an evening together face-to-face. Turn off the T.V. and all electronic devices and just try to create some positive interaction together. Play a card game. Listen to an audio-book together and talk about it afterward. Go for a walk.
- Go to our website at www.calgarycouplescounselling.com and look up the Marriage Quiz. Download the PDF document, and complete the marriage quiz independently of each other, then follow the suggestions for comparing your respective results with each other in order to open more understanding of what you wish to improve in your relationship. The Marriage Quiz does have a nominal fee for downloading the document. It is not a necessary part of counselling, but you can choose to use it as a tool, if you wish.
- After reading through this document, take a personal inventory of one or two attitude changes you want to make in yourself. How do you aspire to be as a partner? What are your typical responses to undesired situations in your relationship? How do you think your responses are hindering your progress, and how do you want to change them?



Guiding Principles

Finally, this last section includes a list of principles that invite you to reflect on new perspectives that can help you in your journey toward a better relationship.

People Change for the Better when they Feel Inspired to Change

- People typically change for the better, and for the long run, when they feel cared about, inspired and understood. People also change for the better more quickly and permanently when they have been given the space to change on their own terms without demands— in other words, when it is their own idea to change.
- Ellyn Bader, a prominent couples therapist, puts it well when she points out that change comes about better when you have more goals for yourself than you have for your partner.

You Can't Change Your Spouse, but You Can Change Your Response to Your Spouse

- Ellyn Bader reminds us that one of the most challenging aspects of making relationships work is coming to terms with the principle that it is more productive to improve your response to a situation (what you say, how you say it, your attitude, and what you do) than it is to insist that your spouse should just stop their behavior. Don't get me wrong. This is not saying your spouse shouldn't stop a behavior that hurts you or that it is okay for them to be defensive, for example. This is just pointing out that your partner is likely to get defensive when you insist that they should just change, without acknowledging how your own reactions are part of the picture.
- Changing your response can be uncomfortable and difficult. It is easier just to insist that your spouse should be the one changing. Most people would prefer that the situation just didn't have to happen. It is common to avoid reflecting on how we contribute to an unwanted situation or on what we do that makes it worse. This is what keeps us stuck in negative patterns.

We Often React with Ineffective Behaviors When We Feel Threatened

- Most of the ineffective things we do in relationships fall into just a few categories:
 - a. Judging, blaming & accusing
 - b. Lashing out
 - c. Defending
 - d. Insisting on being right
 - e. Controlling or dominating
 - f. Resentful compliance
 - g. Whining
 - h. Passive and prolonged distancing
- These are normal reactions to feeling stressed and exposed to an emotional threat. An emotional threat is any signal you receive that tells you someone you care about is withdrawing their love and approval or is deserting you, or that you are being judged and found wanting, or that you are losing freedom, or that you



are not safe from ridicule and put downs, and so on. While the reactions listed above are common, they are not helpful or healthy to a relationship. Improving your relationship means learning to better manage these reactions to emotional threat signals you receive from your spouse and doing your best to decrease the emotional threat signals that you send to your partner. An important goal is to help foster a loving and secure connection in your relationship where your partner can feel safe with you. This is done by making a conscious effort to send fewer and fewer emotionally threatening signals while simultaneously learning to be your partner's haven. Even though it is true that you each need to work on improving your responses no matter how the other person has acted, it is disingenuous to blame your spouse for reacting negatively to you, while not acknowledging that you sent an emotional threat that triggered that reaction.

You Still May Need to Adjust Your Response Even When You Didn't Intend a Negative Outcome

- Another principle that can be hard to accept and yet is essential to your success as a partner is that you may still need to improve your response, or at least acknowledge an ill-informed response, even when you did not mean to send an emotionally threatening signal. Otherwise, the message you send is something like, "since I did not intend to cause hurt, you are wrong for feeling hurt," or, "your feelings should always be consistent with my intentions. If they are not, then you must be doing something wrong that you need to change, not me." This message causes further pain and disconnection. A better response is to express caring and compassion for your partner and to acknowledge that the way your partner felt in response to your actions is understandable. Then work to identify how you can adjust your actions to help your partner feel better.
- If you did something to hurt or disappoint your spouse, but did not mean to do it, try not to get too caught up in defending your good intentions. You didn't mean to cause pain. You were not trying to do something wrong. That's a good start but do take responsibility for your part in the misunderstanding. Perhaps you were not tuned in to the feelings and needs of your spouse at the time. You may have inadvertently pressed against his or her sensitivities without thinking. This does not mean you are bad. Just because you made an error, overreacted, or underreacted does not make you a terrible person. It makes you human. But you still need to acknowledge how your actions made your spouse feel. Indeed, until you do, your spouse is not likely to feel heard and their hurt is not likely to heal fully.

Our Negative Assumptions about our Partner's Motives are Usually Wrong

- Most of the time, when our partner does something that upsets us, what we assume to be true about their motives has little to do with their actual motives or intentions. Unfortunately, it is often very difficult for us to change our assumptions because we depend on our interpretations of our partner's motives in order to justify our own negative response.
- Making your spouse into a villain, especially when they were not trying to make a mistake, will only lessen your own chances of being heard, validated, or understood. Sometimes we approach our spouse as though they had committed a grievous crime against us. It is as though we say to our spouse, "I am upset with you. I only have a right to be upset with you if you have done something very wrong to me. If you've done something wrong to me then I am justified in telling you how you are failing as a human being."

Blame and Criticism of Others Inhibits Self-Awareness and Personal Growth

- Most of the time, the blaming, judgmental or critical things we might say of others (our spouse) hides an important truth about ourselves. If you complain to your spouse, "you criticize me too much," these words imply that he should stop being critical. This might be true. Perhaps he should stop being critical (or she), but the more you focus on finding fault with the other person the more you do not have to be vulnerable or real with them about your own reactions or deeper feelings. You do not have to reveal that maybe you feel inadequate, or that the criticism makes you feel unworthy or inferior, or that you are afraid, or that you feel rejected, nor do you have to ask for what you want and risk not receiving it. You also do not have to acknowledge that the behavior you feel criticized about may indeed be something that you could work on improving.



What Kind of Influence do You Want to Have?

- While you cannot change your partner, you can influence your partner. The question is what kind of influence do you want to have? Do you want to push your partner away from you and make it more likely your partner will avoid you, lie to you, or rebel against you? Or do you want your partner to feel inspired by you, to approach you, and to want to listen to you? Asking yourself this question before you respond can help you adjust your response.

A Thought About Judging

- Judging your partner is claiming victory over a battle that you have never actually fought.

Seek Understanding First, Then Seek Solutions

- Understanding the impact of a problem always comes before implementing solutions to that problem. Too often, we jump straight to solutions because we feel uncomfortable hearing about our part in a problem. People rarely move ahead with solutions until they have had a chance to feel understood about how they have been impacted by a problem.

If You Strive to Consistently Act in Your Partner's Best Interests, Trust Will Grow

- Trust is the bedrock foundation of a strong relationship. Trust is confidence that your partner will have your back no matter what and will actively and consciously seek an outcome that maximizes your well-being as well as his or hers, even when no one is watching.
- Trustworthiness is your willingness to sacrifice for the relationship, and to consistently make decisions that are good for the partnership, not just for you only. If you are not consistently trustworthy, even when you think are alone, you cannot expect your partner to trust you. If you are not consistently trustworthy in the little things, you cannot expect your partner to trust you in the big things.

Assertiveness is not the Same as Being Aggressive

- Being assertive is not the same thing as attacking someone. Standing up for yourself is not the same thing as putting someone else down. You can learn to be firm without being aggressive. You can learn to express your feelings without being offensive.

Disagreement Isn't the Same as an Attack

- Another important milestone that couples reach in their relationship is coming to terms with the observation that when your spouse disagrees with you, it is not the same thing as them attacking you or diminishing you.

Attitude is Crucial

- Attitude is crucial. Good communication skills cannot make up for a bad attitude. In fact, good communication skills by someone with a bad attitude can make a bad relationship even worse! Your attitude toward your spouse is more important than following a list of technical communication steps. A bad attitude is believing that you have done nothing wrong, that you don't need to change or apologize, or that your partner is overreacting. A good attitude means being willing to acknowledge your part, not blame your partner, and to put effort into making the relationship better. A good attitude is defined by generosity, humility, and self-accountability.



Love is an Action, a Verb

- Loving someone is a decision that leads to action. It is not just a feeling. It is something you do. Loving actions may be motivated by feelings, but not always. You can love someone even when you don't really like them. And you can like someone without truly loving them.



Reconnecting with your partner is possible

READY TO START YOUR COUPLES COUNSELLING JOURNEY?

Book an appointment today with one of our caring and highly qualified couples counsellors by phone or by booking online.

(403) 255-8577

calgarycouplescounselling.com

