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Couple's Work

If you have never been involved in couple's therapy, it may be helpful to understand a few things that differentiate it from individual therapy.

Patience:

When a couple presents for counseling there is often a lot of distress in the relationship. This can be from years of problems that have never been resolved, or from a new but intense issue that has recently arisen. In either case, emotions such as fear, sadness, and anger are often running high. Your therapist will be trying to help you sort through all of this in the first few sessions. While it may seem like things aren't moving quickly enough, it is important to realize that what took years to undo might take at least a few hours to begin repairing. So, patience is important in the first few sessions of couple's therapy and it can be very helpful to have your first few appointments scheduled and spaced no more than a week or ten days apart. This will help your therapist get to know you and your story and get the ball rolling.

Introspection:

In couple's counseling, having the ability to look evaluatively and critically at yourself is as important as knowing how your partner is bothering you. We call this introspection. A client must be able to talk about how they are feeling, what they are thinking, and why they behave in certain ways. The Popeye Defense, "I yam-who- I- yam", will not be particularly helpful! Your therapist will probably be asking you a little about your own family of origin and childhood, important aspects of your personal history, and a bit about what makes you tick. Being able to be reflective and honest about this will go a long way in helping the counseling. If someone is not able or ready to look at their own thoughts feelings, and behaviors, a referral for individual counseling may be made to help this person start the process of looking inward.

Commitment to Change:

Any long-term relationship is hard work. A couple can expect to hit rough patches in the relationship and to feel stuck. The fact that you are seeking help is hopefully a sign that you are committing yourself to changing. Your therapist will work with you to find areas in your relationship that aren't working and that need healing. This all sounds easy but it is harder to change than we would like to admit. Surely it would be easier if the other person would change! Research tells us that it takes nine months for a change in a relationship to stick and to be really helpful. This may seem like a long time and like an expensive endeavor. However, if you can put this in a different perspective, nine months of therapy and hundreds of dollars is nothing compared to a life-time of divorce with all of its collateral damage and hundreds of thousands of dollars of attorneys fees, child-support, and alimony. It may at least be worth a good try.

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The Love Lab:

We do have good research on what makes marriages successful, thanks to so many people. Specifically, I'd like to comment on the on-going work of John Gottman and others at the University of Washington, Seattle, where the "Love Lab" is. We know that good marriages have several things in common, and that certain behaviors are predictive of marital failure.

We know that good marriages have deep and satisfying friendships. And we know that on-going friendships are intentional and take some effort. With this in mind, there are Seven Principles that Gottman has assessed as being at the heart of successful marriages:

- 1) Enhance Your Love Maps: In essence, get to know your partner better.
- 2) Nurture Your Fondness and Admiration
- 3) Turn Toward Each Other Instead of Away
- 4) Let Your Partner Influence You
- 5) Solve Your Solvable Problems
- 6) Overcome Gridlock
- 7) Create Shared Meaning

Additionally, through the great work at the Love-Lab, we know that there are patterns of behavior that have the capacity to destroy marriage:

- 1) Harsh Start-Ups in Conflict
- 2) The Four-Horseman of the Apocalypse (Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, Stonewalling)
- 3) Emotional/Cognitive Flooding
- 4) Bad Body Language
- 5) Failed Repair Attempts
- 6) Bad Memories

In your time in therapy, you may work on some of these areas of marriage, either directly or indirectly with your therapist. It may be helpful to read Gottman's book, The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work, which is available in our office for \$16.00.