

# Effective Marital Counseling

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Having worked with hundreds of couples over the years, I have witnessed how several important variables contribute to making marital counseling successful. I try and promote, as quickly as each couple will allow, an atmosphere whereby the greatest possibility for growth and positive change can occur.

In a somewhat exaggerated fashion, let me set forth the extreme boundaries of this through a *Worst Case* and *Best Case* scenario.

## Worst Case Scenario

In this instance, the couple comes in with each partner primarily focused on what the other needs to change in order for the relationship to improve. Commonly heard is, "***If he/she would just do/not do this or that, things would be better!***"

This is commonly called the *blame game*. A huge amount of emotion, time, and energy is expended blaming and defending against attack, with little left over for listening, understanding, and problem solving.

## Best Case Scenario

In this instance, each partner comes to counseling focused on understanding and listening instead of changing the other. Here the predominant message is, "***I'm here to focus on myself, and what I need to do different to make things better.***"

Knowing that it is always easier to see what someone *e/se* needs to change, does it sound impossible for two persons who are obviously hurting to focus on something other than blame? It's not - and the sooner a couple can obtain such a focus, the sooner therapy will become effective. I've seen it happen!

## Reflections on Successful Marital Counseling

**FIRST: Who is the client?** For couples in counseling, neither individual is "therapeutically" the client. The relationship itself is my client. That is my focus. I focus on whatever would help my client become healthier. You never need worry about me "taking sides." It just isn't my focus. Most marital problems *and* solutions are not linear, but reciprocal.

**SECOND: Blame and fault finding.** I never use these words in counseling. I try earnestly and honestly to acknowledge the pain experienced by both partners, however, eventually, if we find something that isn't working - let's try something else. When we find what does work, let's build on it and do more of that.

**THIRD: Powerlessness.** Whether we argue about sex, kids, money, in-laws, household chores - these are usually issues of power and control expressed symbolically through whatever we are arguing about. A big part of having a growing marriage is learning to negotiate power and control. Where does powerlessness come from? In part, from

- Focusing too much on past wrongs (which cannot be undone),
- Seeking future guarantees (which cannot be predicted or controlled), and/or
- Trying to change the other person (whom we cannot control).

A more productive focus is, *What can I focus on in the here-and-now that would make things better?* And this may require breaking some bad habits of inviting powerlessness into every argument by focusing on things beyond our control.

**FOURTH: Punish or problem solve?** Unfortunately, many couples only talk about their relationship during their most hurt and angry moments. This can lead to a spiraling cycle of pursuit and distancing. Before confronting one's partner, we need to ask ourselves an honest question: *Is my real goal here to punish or problem solve?* If you are still feeling so hurt that the primary goal is *payback*, then we need to find either a constructive way of expressing that hurt or heal sufficiently so that we can focus on solving the problem.

**FIFTH: Focus on acceptable risk.** Love always involves risk - relationships slowly suffocate when risk is replaced by defensiveness. To the greatest degree possible, counseling should promote an environment where each partner feels "safe to risk" expressing themselves in ways more likely to be heard and understood. Making our needs known in ways most likely to be heard - that is absolutely important - and a skill most of us need to develop over time.

If you are encountering marital issues that continue to resurface without resolution, or, you are having difficulties expressing your needs or being heard, or, if arguments have become non-productive or abusive, then perhaps an outside, objective, and un-biased counselor can help you find more productive pathways to a healthy relationship. Feel free to call if you have any questions about how or where to find such support.

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