

## **What Couples Counseling is and How it Works**

Most couples don't know what to expect when they enter counseling. This "unknown" can keep them from beginning the process and cause them to postpone the benefits that can come from it. I have written this to help you better understand couples counseling as well as what to expect from working with me as your counselor. My hope is that, after reading this, you and your partner will be able to make a more informed decision about beginning the process of improving your relationship.

### **What is counseling like?**

In some ways, counseling is different for everyone. All couples deal with similar issues, but you and your partner are unique individuals and that makes your relationship unique. Together we will identify how those differences are influencing your relationship and tailor counseling to meet your unique situation.

However, there are some basic similarities in therapy that, when understood, can lead to a better result for you and your partner. These include:

- Developing good communication skills
- Understanding and learning to recognize the difference between right and left-brain communication approaches
- Setting and respecting each other's boundaries
- Gaining insight into what makes you tick and empathy for the things that make your partner tick
- Developing and building trust in each other
- Understanding your personal attachment style and that of your partner
- Learning to understand your emotions and how to manage them
- Identifying and working through difficulties and disagreements

All this and more will be covered during therapy. The following discusses my approach to doing just that.

### **A few mistaken ideas about counseling**

Some couples come to counseling with the idea that the past week's arguments will be rehashed in a session and the "truth" of who was right or wrong will come to light. They want a mediator to resolve their conflicts and think that a counselor will be that for them. There may be counselors in Anchorage who work that way, but I do not. My firm belief from years of working with couples is that arguments are not resolved by putting out individual fires (conflicts), but rather by understanding good communication, having insight into yourself, and having empathy for your

partner. This is what we will be working on in couples counseling. Yes, it does take work! But as you develop these skills, you will be able to more effectively resolve issues and avoid fighting unfairly.

*Be aware that I will stop you from yelling or angrily arguing with each other during the session and have, on very rare occasions, asked couples to leave who would not cease. Simply put, there is not enough time for it. You will not be getting what you came for and will be wasting your money. This is very rarely an issue, but I think it is something worth mentioning.*

After the first few sessions, some couples show up for counseling with nothing to discuss, hoping that by simply showing up they will receive insights and ideas that will solve their specific issues. In a sense, these couples are “coming to the mountain” for a dose of wisdom. This approach leaves me guessing what their most important needs and desires are. If I am having to guess, I can easily guess wrong. I might assume your needs are similar to other couples, when they are actually quite different. This derails the process and you and your partner will not get your needs met. Sometimes this approach can lead to a new understanding of general, basic relationship skills. However, it often leaves the couple with a sense that their specific needs are not being met or that their relationship is not heading in the direction they had hoped it would after therapy.

Another mistake couples make when seeking help is believing that only their partner needs to make changes for the relationship to improve. This is understandable. It is often much more difficult to see our own faults than it is to recognize the faults of others. However, if couples counseling is going to be successful, it is imperative that both of you come ready to identify and make changes within yourself. After all, we can't control the emotions and actions of others, but we do have complete control over ourselves.

### **So, what should I come to counseling prepared to do?**

Be prepared to discuss issues that are important to you and have been a stumbling block to good communication and growth in your relationship. Although talking about a specific argument may not be productive, becoming aware of what underlying fears, issues and anxieties are fueling the argument (and probably behind others as well) can make a significant, long term difference.

Be prepared to look inward. It is important to identify ways that you can change to help the relationship improve. Your partner will be doing the same, so you don't have to feel that all the change is coming from you. You will both be working on yourselves and will meet each other in the middle. With these new skills win-lose situations will evaporate and you will both begin to trust that each of you has the best interest of the other in mind.

Prepare to determine what you expect and need from the relationship and what you are willing to give. It is important to have a clear idea of what is necessary for you to stay healthy both in your relationship and as an individual. That said, you also need to be seriously interested and invested in meeting the needs of your partner. Good relationships are built on two healthy individuals coming together.

## **What is the counselor's role?**

In couples counseling, I do not usually sit back and let the session unfold. In most cases, I take an active role in the process. I do this by identifying blind spots, helping you negotiate disagreements on specific issues and helping you reach the broader goals of your journey together. I might make suggestions I believe will be beneficial for you and your partner to explore in the process of improving your relationship. I will never say you *have* to do this or that for your relationship to be successful. Each couple is different; there is no "one size fits all." Together, we will explore what works for most couples and how to tailor those techniques to your specific relationship.

As we address your specific struggles, I will ensure that each of you have equal time to speak and that effective, healthy communication skills are being used as counseling progresses.

Finally, it is important to understand that, in couples counseling, as opposed to counseling you receive as an individual, your *relationship* is the client, and I will work to make that relationship as strong as possible. In some cases, I may want to see each of you individually for a session or two, but if extensive individual counseling is needed, I will recommend that you see a different counselor so that impartiality can be maintained in your couples work.

## **What methods will the counselor use to help me make positive changes?**

Every counselor has their own idea about what works best to help couples improve their relationship. As a result, each counselor will approach counseling differently. The following are skills I believe to be particularly important when working toward a healthy, happy relationship. These are skills you can expect to improve upon when working with me.

### **Healthy, Productive Communication**

Communication skills will be taught as the foundation of a good relationship during your first two or three sessions of couples counseling. Learning to communicate in a healthy way is critical for improving relationships. Though most couples probably

assume they will learn better communication skills in couples counseling, my approach is somewhat unique. Many couples think good communication is all about “I” statements and “active listening.” Most people are familiar with communication training that focuses on these generic skills. This may be all you need to successfully deal with supervisors and employees at work, but it is only a starting point in a committed relationship. During counseling, couples usually discover that good communication is much more complex and requires more attention and skill than they thought. For a relationship to be successful, good communication must be understood as much more nuanced than using simple “I” statements, etc.

For instance:

You are not only using aggressive speech when you verbalize a demand of each other. You are communicating aggressively anytime you are directly, or indirectly asking your partner to change his/her position and accept yours. Of course, sometimes doing this is appropriate and appreciated. Your partner will likely think it is special and will be appreciative if you take the time to pick out their birthday gift yourself without asking them what they want. This will show that you know them and what makes them special and were thoughtful enough to go out of your way to make them happy. However, recognizing the cumulative effect of making even these types of decisions can keep resentment from building and resulting in future misunderstanding and arguments.

The good news is that every couple can learn to communicate with intention and understanding when they are determined to do so.

### **Understanding Emotions**

Another critical skill is learning to identify where strong emotional reactions to each other come from. We all have different backgrounds and life experiences. We really only know the world, and what it is like to be human, from our own personal experiences and it is very hard to understand, or even recognize, why someone else might have different motivations or intentions when they say, or act in a particular way. The confusion and hurt feelings that result are the reason many relationships fail. Often, couples try to build healthy relationships based on mistaken beliefs about themselves as individuals, about their partner, and about how relationships “should work.” Obviously, this is not a successful approach. It is important for couples to be able to identify mistaken beliefs and know what to do about them once they are identified. In couples counseling, I will provide you with a tool to do so early on in therapy.

## **How does the counselor accomplish these things?**

My therapy is eclectic in nature. That means I do not draw from just one school of therapeutic thought. Instead, I combine several models of therapy in a careful way to provide the most beneficial results in counseling. My approach draws heavily from Solution-Focused, Cognitive Behavioral, and Psychodynamic principles. These are utilized within a framework of understanding ourselves and our relationships called Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB).

Why do these different approaches work well together?

Solution-focused therapy helps a couple focus on what is working in their relationship and do more of those things. You may have heard the adage, “you hit what you aim at.” Well, if you are only focusing on the problems in your relationship, you may be continuing to cause them, because they are all you are paying attention to! When you focus on what is working, you begin to do more of the good things, building trust for each other and enjoying each other more, as the behaviors that have caused problems start to fade away.

Recognizing what is and is not working in a relationship can be tricky though. Throughout life we develop thinking errors and cognitive distortions. For instance, some couples believe healthy relationships involve never having an argument. Arguments can definitely damage a relationship, but expecting you will never have one? That’s a cognitive distortion. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) helps couples be on the lookout for this type of thinking error, and how to correct it, by changing our beliefs when one is discovered.

Recognizing our own thinking errors is best done when we understand ourselves completely; knowing why we do, say, or act in a particular way in a given situation. Understanding our motives is really a life-long process. How can we really know what beliefs are underlying our behavior and thought process which seems so natural and automatic? Why does our partner do, say, or act differently than we do, in the exact same situation? Does that mean one of us is “just plain wrong?” Psychodynamic psychotherapy helps to identify the underlying programming that has been laid down throughout our life. Once we begin to understand this programming and how it was developed, we can decide if we want to keep, get rid of, or modify how we respond to emotions they trigger. We also begin to recognize that our disagreements are not usually about one of us being “wrong.”

Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB) is a framework for understanding how the brain functions in relationships. What exactly is going on “under the hood” when you and your partner are having fun, communicating well (or poorly), feeling intimate, or wanting to be apart from each other? What mechanisms result in each of us being unique and having our individual programming in the first place? How do our individual differences effect how we connect with each other in our relationship?

IPNB helps us stitch together the three therapies mentioned above to make sense of our differences and similarities and begin build insight, empathy and trust.

### **How long does couples counseling take?**

There is no pre-set number of sessions for completing couples counseling. That said, experience suggests the average number of sessions tends to be about eight. I have worked with some couples many more times than this and some couples come for only a handful of sessions. Generally, it takes at least three sessions to provide all the information needed to begin the process of improving a relationship. Some couples have found that after completing initial therapy, a periodic “checkup” is helpful to ensure progress continues and to identify where skills have been forgotten or need to be improved upon.

I suggest most couples set aside time for four consecutive weekly appointments. After that, two or more weeks between sessions allows couples to practice what they have learned and come back to discuss what is working and what still needs work.

For couples that cannot set aside four consecutive weeks due to separation caused by work (on the Slope for example) or military deployment, I have the capability to do HIPAA compliant tele-counseling and have found this to be very successful in the past.

### **Will my insurance cover the cost of couples counseling?**

Often insurance companies do not cover couples counseling. Call our office and Karen, who has been working with insurance companies for over fifteen years, will help navigate those sometimes-treacherous waters.

Our office number is: (907)222-2503

Karen will contact your insurance company and let you know about your benefits.

### **What next?**

If what you have read has piqued your interest, you can check out the rest of the website and give us a call. If you have further questions call Karen and she will be happy to help.