

10 Surprising Facts About Couple's Therapy

Get the scoop on what to expect when you talk to a pro about your relationship

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The biggest misconception about couple's therapy? That it's a matter of he said/she said. It's not. "In individual therapy, you dissect your own baggage. But with couples therapy, you *both* have brought your baggage into the room," and it all has to be unraveled and sorted out, says Scott Wetzler, PhD, director of the Supporting Healthy Marriage program at Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx, New York. Want to know more? Read on to find out 10 things you may not know about couple's therapy.

1. Your marriage doesn't have to be on the rocks. Too many couples opt for therapy "when they're either on the verge of divorce or have already made the decision and need a way to formalize it," says Dr. Wetzler. **Instead:** Don't be afraid to think about marriage therapy the way you would about exercise: as something that's good for your ongoing health.

2. It's not all about "communication." When the two of you sit down on the couch, the therapist is not necessarily going to force you to do "reflective listening," or mirroring back what your partner says to you, says [Susan Fletcher, PhD](#), a psychologist and therapist in Plano, Texas. That exercise, says Dr. Fletcher, assumes that the problem is that you're not communicating at all. "The more common problem is that couples are communicating in ways that push each other's emotional buttons." **Instead:** Your therapist should help you learn how to communicate more



effectively. The goal is to “get emotion out of the way when you are talking, so you can get to the root of problems.”

3. You aren't there to “fix” issues once and for all. Many issues that bring couples to therapy may not actually be resolvable, says Dr. Fletcher. For example, if one of you had an affair, you can't “fix” the fact that a betrayal happened. Or if the problem you face is that one of your families is butting in too much, you won't change that overnight. **Instead:** Your therapist should work with you to repair the problems that arise—so for example, if it's infidelity, you're there to work on repairing trust in order to move forward in your marriage.

4. Your therapist won't offer odds of success. “I get asked that all the time,” says Dr. Fletcher, “and a good therapist shouldn't actually know that answer off the bat.” **Instead:** “Your therapist should make it clear that anyone can ‘make it,’ if they're willing to put in the time, hard work and honesty.” However, [Fran Walfish, PsyD](#), a therapist in Beverly Hills, California says, “if you feel judged, or that your therapist has already taken sides, run in the other direction and find someone else,” says www.drfranwalfish.com.

5. It's not as dramatic as it looks on TV. As much as Gabriel Byrne's character in the HBO series *In Treatment* is an empathetic therapist, his talent for hitting on the crux of the problem by episode two is not a mirror for real life. **Instead:** Only very occasionally is there a big “aha!” moment in couples therapy, says Dr. Wetzler. Most of the time, therapists ask lots and lots of questions to get you to explore issues.

6. You won't always hit on the “why” of issues. Why do you *always* do this, while he *always* does that? A good therapist shouldn't spend too much time indulging you in going over and over past hurts. **Instead:** “Too often, couples get stuck trying to tell their side of a story over and over, or trying to find fault,” says Dr. Fletcher. Your therapist should steer you away from that vicious circle, so that you work out a plan for the future, rather than reliving the past.

7. You won't emerge from therapy with a perfect union. Perfection doesn't exist; life is filled with disappointments, says Dr. Walfish. Neither therapy nor your therapist can make the bad stuff disappear. **Instead:** The key is learning how to move together through the ups and downs of life, and weather them. “A therapist can teach you coping skills,” she says.

8. There will be rules. Therapy shouldn't be a free-for-all where the two of you can sit on the couch and make digs or hurtful comments; that's not productive, says Dr. Walfish. **Instead:** “There have to be ground rules—for example, we won't hurt each other with words, and we'll find ways to express strong feelings without demeaning.”



9. You're not doomed if all you do is argue. In fact, the opposite is true, says Dr. Fletcher. "Couples who are flat and unresponsive probably have already given up, which makes it nearly impossible for me to help them." **Instead:** Realize that if the two of you are still engaged with each other—even if engagement is defined by yelling and name calling—you have a chance (if you work hard) to save your marriage, says Dr. Fletcher.

10. There's no one, ideal form of therapy. Couples counselors come in every stripe, from many different schools of thought and with many different approaches. One size will not fit all, nor should it, says Dr. Wetzler. **Instead:** Use the first session as a consultation, "so you can find someone you're comfortable with, and whom you feel you can talk to."



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