

When You Want to Go to Counseling But Your Partner Doesn't

Relationships take work. While romance may help to bring many couples together, sharing a lifetime together brings many new demands, calling for relationship skills that may never have been needed before.

For some couples the skills necessary for a successful relationship seem to come fairly easily, or at least are learned over time. These couples find they:

- can communicate openly and honestly, sharing feelings, thoughts and ideas
- are able to develop problem-solving skills so that conflicts can be talked through and resolved to both partners' satisfaction
- have an awareness that long-term satisfaction as a couple requires commitment and effort on both sides

When these skills are lacking, however, conflict can lead to frustration, resentment and distance between partners who were once close and loving. And when attempts to resolve longstanding conflicts fail, new skills and insights are required. This is where professional couples counseling can help.

Relationship counseling isn't a magic bullet that suddenly solves a couple's problems. But it is an opportunity learn new insights and skills under professional guidance that can make a significant difference in a relationship.

Most couple counseling starts by getting the partners to understand that both parties in a relationship are responsible, but no one is to be blamed for what has gone wrong. Counseling will also focus on learning new conflict resolution skills ? how to express thoughts and feelings more clearly, listen more carefully, and respond more sensitively.

It's also helpful to uncover how communications broke down in the first place. Each of us brings old "baggage" into our relationships ? unresolved hurt, disappointment and anger from the past. We also grew up in different homes with different expectations. Through professional counseling, partners learn to understand each other better and communicate more comfortably across individual differences.

But an important question that faces many couples in need of help is to how to get the process started. It's seldom that both partners will come to the decision at the same time that help is needed. In many cases, it's often only one partner who feels that there is a real problem and that counseling could help.

How can you raise the idea of couples counseling to your mate? Choose a time when the two of you are calm to introduce the subject. Keep it simple. Avoid blaming or accusing, and maintain an upbeat attitude. It's always easier to accept a loving message than an angry one. You may want to say something like, "Our relationship is very important to me. I love you and I want us to stay together. Lately we haven't been as close as usual. I think couples counseling could help us be happier ? will you try it with me?"

If your partner is lukewarm about the idea, offer to get some information about counselors in your area. If your partner agrees to go only because he or she thinks you have a problem, don't take it personally. Once your partner meets the counselor, you may both be glad to continue counseling.

And don't despair if your partner reacts defensively ("I don't think there's anything wrong") or negatively ("I don't need a stranger telling me what to do!"). Your partner may be content with the way things are. He or she may deny problems exist, even when these problems seem quite obvious to you, and even to others. Or your partner may become angry when you bring up issues that concern you. There are many common reasons why people avoid counseling, including fear of the unknown, anxiety about exposing innermost feelings, or the belief that admitting problems indicates weakness.

If your partner absolutely refuses to participate, begin counseling yourself. Your stress will diminish and your outlook brighten. Your partner may even notice the difference and become curious.

Invite your partner to join you, but avoid pushing. A high pressure approach often creates resistance. Instead of nagging or getting angry, keep letting your partner know how important he or she is to you and how much you want your relationship to succeed.

While you can't force your partner to change, one person's growth can often inspire another's. When couples approach their difficulties with a willingness to grow and learn, the end result can be a deeply satisfying, loving relationship strong enough to last a lifetime.

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