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Marriage & Couples Therapy©

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Let's introduce you to how we help couples.

Please take 5-6 minutes to learn about the goals and methods of couples therapy, also called marriage counseling or marital therapy.

Please also see related articles on our Marriage and Couples page at www.shorehavenbhi.com.

1) Problems Often Couples Face in a Committed Relationship or Marriage

- **Communication Misunderstandings:** A) Difficulties in expressing thoughts, feelings, or needs, leading to conflicts, hurt feelings, misunderstood statements. B) A mismatch of what was intended and what was said. C) Expecting to be understood without explaining yourself. D) Escalation of disagreements into arguments, some of which can be quite painful. E) Raising a point harshly, critically, so it elicits defensiveness rather than conversation. F) Expecting criticism alone to be enough to make a difference. G) Not clearly requesting what you want or need.
- **Broken Trust:** Stemming from infidelity, dishonesty, deception, or inconsistent behavior, which erodes the foundation of the relationship, or not fulfilling promises.
- **Intimacy Problems:** Both emotional and physical, often rooted in deeper personal or relational conflicts or even in trauma, lack of closeness.
- **Financial Strain:** Disagreements over money management, spending habits, or financial goals. Gambling or overspending problems.
- **Differing Values and Beliefs:** Challenges arising from having different cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, life goals, or life philosophies.
- **Life Transitions:** Struggles with adapting to major changes like parenthood, job loss, or relocation.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Inability to resolve disagreements effectively, leading to persistent conflicts.

- **Substance Use:** Addictive behaviors, drug or alcohol abuse, or compulsive gambling put enormous strain on relationships.
- **Extended Family:** A couple needs to have a firm boundary around their relationship and separating it from parents and other relatives. Sometimes, a partner remains over-connected with the extended family. Sometimes, it is an over-connection with friends at the expense of the relationship.

At some point, one partner or both members of the couple decided it was time to seek help for one of these problems. The couple then may be on the brink of breaking up or they may be trying to repair the distressing state of their relationship.

When they call for help, we try to make it as easy and as quick as possible for couples to get the help that they need.

2) Goals of Couples Therapy

Let me say something about the goals of *therapy for couples*.

We make **individual goals** that fit your particular situation. For example, if excessive arguing is the problem - reducing arguing and making the discussion of differences more cooperative and peaceful - will be a goal. If the problem has to do with one member's relationship to this family-of-origin being too involved, we may set a goal for understanding the importance of defending and protecting your own couple relationship.

However, marriage and family therapists have more **general goals for all couples**. Here are those goals.

- **Improving Communication:** Fostering safe, open, honest, and empathetic communication between partners. Learning skills of reciprocity and mutuality - healthy abilities to respect one another and help each partner feel heard and equal. Bringing up concerns in a positive way that does not evoke defensiveness. Making sure to ask about your partner's day and to remember their plans and important events in their lives is called Love Mapping, an essential skill.
- **Rebuilding Trust:** Working on strategies to rebuild trust after it has been broken.
- **Enhancing Intimacy:** Deepening emotional and physical connections between partners. Increasing the sense of stable, secure attachment.
- **Conflict Management:** New patterns that help resolve differences effectively, without argument.
- **Empathic Understanding:** Taking your partner's perspective helps make the relationship work more comfortably and helps your partner understand your perspective as well.
- **Strengthening the Relationship:** Relationships grow and the partners become more mature, with more and more life skills and relational skills. However, a troubled relationship leads to stagnation and interferes with skill development. So, we hope to lead to skills for effective marital well-being. Moving from emotional dependence to emotional interdependence. For every negative behavior – a criticism, blame, complaint – it takes 5 or more positive behaviors – compliment, praise, loving words, acts of helping – to balance it out.

- **Individual Growth:** Understanding how individual behaviors and history impact the relationship, encouraging personal growth and emotional maturity.

3) Benefits of Couples Therapy

These are some of the benefits couples therapy can offer:

- **Understand each other better:** Couples therapy can help you understand yourself and your partner better. It can help both of you express your feelings, hopes, fears, priorities, values, and beliefs. Feeling Heard and valued is one of the most important features of a happy relationship.
- **Identify relationship impasses:** Your therapist helps identify where you are stuck in repetitive patterns and recurring conflicts, lack of trust, lack of connection, and consistent harm to the relationship.
- **Improve interaction:** Smooth interaction - without criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling, put-downs, shame, or fear - leading to understanding, making decisions, and solving problems is a high-level couple skill. Including expressing one's self with blaming or criticism.
- **Resolve conflicts:** Troubled couples tend to escalate rather than solve problems. They tend to stonewall or to leave conflicts repeatedly unfinished. Therapy helps to resolve those differences, find a middle ground, find a way to accept differences, learn to talk about differences without conflict.
- **Increase attachment and closeness and stronger friendship:** Secure attachment, friendship, and emotional intimacy are core feelings in a relationship and we help build them.
- **Stop escalating and ineffective patterns:** We identify patterns that are not working for the relationship and shift to more effective patterns.
- **Increased couple satisfaction:** Marital counselors are concerned with each member feeling higher satisfaction in the relationship.
- **Increased coherence:** By this we mean between agreement between the partners on their goals, their understandings of one another's interests, goals, and daily experiences.
- **Improved financial planning:** Better coordination of finances based upon agreement on future goals and long-term planning.

4) Strategies of Couples Therapists

These are some of the strategies a couples therapist might employ:

- **Taking a History, Learning What Changes You want to See, Learning Your Patterns:** In order to understand and intervene to help you, we need a history starting with your parents, your upbringing, your previous relationships, and the history of your current relationship.

Some Marital therapists find it beneficial to meet with the couple once, then each partner separately, then to use what was learned in order to work more effectively with the couple.

The therapist will create a safe, confidential space for you to disclose all this information.

- **Setting Goals:** The therapist will ask you such questions as these:
 - What changes do you want to see in your relationship?
 - Assuming things change for the better, let's say a year from now, what will you say when you look back and reflect on the good work we did together?
 - What have you noticed changing since you made the call for help?
 - What changes are the most important for you?
 - When in the past have you been doing the things you want to see different now?
- **Focusing on Change:** Therapists use the history to understand the forces that shape current reactions. But we are interested in change. Therapy is the art and science of change.
- **Identifying and Clarifying Emotions:** Many of our problems are due to our lack of clear understanding and articulation of our underlying emotions.
- **Using the Past:** We use the past in two ways.
 - 1) How have past experiences taught you or conditioned you to perceive in the way you do and react in the way you do? This understanding helps you free yourself from dysfunctional past learning.
 - 2) What past accomplishments and positive patterns can we use to help you restore better patterns now?
- **Solution-Talk:** You will find couples counselors to do not spend a lot of time in sessions on what is going wrong, partners' faults, and complaints. We are focused on the strengths and patterns we can help you use in order to move toward solutions. We don't mean simple solutions such as advice. We do not give much advice. We mean solutions that change internal and interpersonal patterns.
- **Reinforcing New Skills:** Interpersonal skills, skills for managing emotions skills for more effective communication of wants and needs, skills for coping with life's challenges, negotiation and compromise skills, conflict resolution skills, problem-solving skills - you may be surprised at the wide repertoire of skills required for effective marriage! Couples Therapists are paying attention to your skill level and are considering new skills that will benefit the relationship.
- **Attachment Focus:** Marital therapists want to see mostly behaviors that enhance the connection between partners and will interrupt actions that are against that connection or closeness.
- **Day-to-Day Effectiveness:** The marriage researcher, John Gottman, whose books are readily available and very helpful, identified a number of skills that make day-to-day married or couple life work best. He was so effective, he could predict which couples would divorce with 90% accuracy - just by appraising a limited group of marital behaviors. Marriage therapists look for some of these skills.
 - 1) **Love Mapping** - In essence, mapping your partner's day and week and important events, and asking about them.
 - 2) **Soft Start-Up** - Beginning every conversation with a gentle rather than harsh approach. Asking "Can you take a few minutes to help me on this?" is far better than "You never help me on this". "Why can't you remember _____" is harsh while "It would mean a lot to me to have

you find a way to remember _____. "Why didn't you _____" is harsh and is likely to elicit defensiveness. Softer would be "It would help me when you _____."

3) **Avoidance of Defensiveness and Stonewalling** - Along with the next two items, these comprise the "Four Horseman" and are predictive of a failing relationship.

4) **Avoidance of Criticism and Contempt** - Couples who act in this way are likely to have chronic conflicts that could be fatal for the relationship.

5) **Predominance of Positive interactions** - Positive interactions, which can be compliments, doing something for you partner, praise, and an array of other behaviors, must be 5x as numerous as criticism, harsh start-ups and other negative behaviors.

Over the years, researchers have discovered numerous ways to work with couples. Some of these methods go into your history and an understanding of how your upbringing and personal history and relationships shapes how you behave in your current relationship. Other approaches look only at the behaviors going on in the relationship now and try to work towards having you behave in ways that we know are much more effective and successful for couples.

In order to learn the kinds of behaviors that help them succeed, researchers have studied the most effective, happy, and compatible couples. It's a little bit like studying a group of 100 year-old people to find out all of the things they did in order to have a long life. We have the same idea about a long and successful marriage - study marital success and help people emulate that.

We hope our knowledge of couples and marriage will help you to be like those marital successes.

Do you want help for a couple problem? Call with you questions or to set up couples therapy. 414-540-2170 or use the Contact Us link above to email us. Our Marriage & Couples Tab on the website has important articles for you.

Shorehaven Behavioral Health is a major mental health clinic and training center with therapy offices in Brown Deer, Greenfield, and Mt. Pleasant, and also offering telehealth throughout Wisconsin. We specialize in challenging cases and rapid access to services. In addition to depression, anxiety, behavioral problems, and most other psychological problems, we work extensively with children & families and with substance use problems. We make referrals and making 1st appointments easy, one call to 414-540-2170.

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