

How does couple therapy help?

There are a number of different evidence-based approaches to helping couples overcome their problems. It has been suggested by Benson et al (2012) that all these approaches focus on change in five areas. It might be useful for you to think about these five areas so that you give yourself the best chance of making couple therapy helpful.

1) Altering your view of the relationship: from *blame to shared responsibility*

Many couples come to therapy seeing the problem being their partner. Each member of the couple seems to be thinking 'If only you'd see things my way, we'd get along fine'. If you can learn to see your problems as coming from two different but equally valid perspectives then it can be easier to see the best in your partner.

2) Changing unhelpful behaviour: from *attack and defend to collaboration and compromise*

When couples are unhappy it usually leads to unhelpful behaviour, for example trying to persuade your partner to change the way they behave or think. Unfortunately, the more you try to get your partner to change they more they are likely to resist and push back at you. The result is often frustration, anger and hopelessness. It can be useful to remember that the only person you can change is yourself. If you can both learn to give a little you'll both get more of what you want.

3) Opening up: from *turning away to turning towards*

When relationships go wrong couples often shut down to each other. When people don't feel safe to share their more vulnerable feelings, or their hopes and fears, it prevents intimacy developing. That can make a relationship feel empty, lonely and loveless. You might find you are more focused on just getting through each day rather than the qualities that brought you together in the first place. If you can share your thoughts and feelings in a caring way you'll feel closer to each other.

4) Changing the way we communicate: from *'you make me...' to 'I think and feel...'*

Along with the struggle to change your partner, and the frustration that results when your best efforts seem to come to nothing or backfire on you, it is usually the case that couples feel that they are not communicating very well. This can be communication about both the big and little things in life. Paying attention to what your partner is trying to tell you is an important part of each of you both getting your needs met.

5) Strengths: from *individual weakness to collective empowerment*

You have somehow made it this far and that's because you have some important strengths and resources that you're drawing on to keep you both going. If you can identify what you like and appreciate about your partner, what you think that each of you is good at, and what has made you a good partnership, then you could identify some real strengths to help you through difficult times.

