

Marriage Counseling

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Marriage counseling, also known as couples counseling, relationship counseling, or couples therapy, is a form of therapy that supports people in intimate [relationships](#). Therapy may be helpful for partners considering separation or seeking improved [intimacy](#) and understanding. While the relationship itself is the focus in marital counseling, each partner is expected to pay attention to self-improvement and self-awareness.

History of Couples Counseling

Relationship counseling, originally known as marriage counseling and reserved for engaged or married couples, was in its infancy in the United States during the 1930s. Marriage counselors educated people about marriage and family life. However, it was rare for partners to seek relationship counseling together.

Couples therapy was transformed by the emergence of [family therapy](#) and the increase in [divorce](#) rates throughout the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, couples therapy was typically conducted with both partners present. Present-day couples counseling is heavily influenced by family therapy, a holistic approach designed to treat the family system together with its individual members. The work of family therapy pioneers, including [Murray Bowen](#) and [Virginia Satir](#), was particularly impactful in developing this approach.

Today, couples counseling is available for married or unmarried people in all kinds of relationships. Counseling usually includes both partners, but there are occasions when a marriage counselor may work with only one person in a relationship. Counseling for individuals in a relationship might center on personal behaviors, reactions, and/or opportunities for growth.

Finding the Right Couples Therapist

It can be helpful to consider whether the marriage counselor is a good fit for both partners before scheduling a couples therapy session. It is important to choose a marriage counselor who:

- Has received the required training to offer couples counseling
- Is experienced dealing with the couple's specific issues
- Works with the couple to develop a therapy plan
- Shows compassion to both partners
- Does not take sides
- Does not allow one partner to speak for or interrupt the other
- Maintains control of each session
- Is easily accessible
- Encourages the couple early to express if they are comfortable with the services offered
- Charges affordable fees or accepts insurance

Approaches to Couples Counseling

Approaches and techniques used in couples therapy can vary depending on the training of the marriage counselor

and the issues experienced by the couple seeking treatment. Some common therapeutic approaches are listed below.

- [Imago relationship therapy](#) explores reasons for negative perceptions or behaviors in the relationship and seeks to restore communication between partners.
- [Emotion-focused therapy](#) creates new, positive interactions between partners and strengthens their emotional bond.
- [Internal Family Systems](#) therapy helps partners better understand each other and the patterns existing in their relationship.
- The [Gottman Method](#) increases closeness, affection, and respect.
- [Positive psychology](#) helps partners focus on positive traits and live in the present.
- [Narrative therapy](#) explores past issues from different angles, helping couples gain insight into adjustments they may need to make in the relationship.
- [Individual counseling](#) can serve as a precursor to couples therapy. It may be a treatment approach for one partner if the other is unwilling to come to couples therapy.

How Couples Counseling Works

The purpose of couples counseling is helping partners learn more about each other and acquire healthy problem-solving skills. The marriage counselor or LMFT may interview both partners, together or individually, during the first few meetings. Afterward, they may provide feedback. The couple may set therapeutic goals with the guidance of the therapist and develop a plan for therapy so each person knows what to expect. In couples therapy, positive results often depend on the couple's motivation and dedication to the process.

As treatment progresses, each partner may become a better listener and communicator. Partners also often learn to support each other new ways. It is not uncommon for conflict to arise in therapy sessions. An ethical marriage counselor will remain neutral and avoid taking sides. Some marriage counselors offer supplemental individual sessions to each partner as a standard part of treatment. Others may offer individual sessions upon request.

Relationship counseling is generally held once a week. The schedule can vary depending on the couple's goals and whether each partner is also attending individual or group therapy sessions. Couples counseling is offered in a variety of settings, including private practices, university counseling centers, and group practices.

Marriage counseling is often short-term, though healing a relationship may take more time. Ultimately, couples therapy will continue for as long as the couple is committed to completing the treatment plan or until they reach resolution.

Who is Couples Counseling For?

Any couple with a history together may benefit from relationship counseling. Couples may seek counseling to resolve relationship issues, gain insight into the dynamics of their relationship, strengthen their emotional bonds, or find amicable ways to bring their relationship to an end. [Premarital counseling](#) is available for individuals who are engaged to be married.

When Is Couples Counseling Recommended?

As all couples experience tension or conflict at some point in their relationship, many people are unsure when they should seek couples counseling. The reality is that couples may seek relationship counseling for many different reasons, including:

- Power struggles
- [Communication issues](#)
- Substance abuse
- Sexual dissatisfaction
- Financial issues
- Anger issues
- [Infidelity](#)
- Major life adjustments
- Frequent conflict or high stress levels
- Conflicting ideas on childrearing

Most couples counselors agree it's best to seek couples counseling as soon as discontent enters the relationship. Therapy need not be delayed until an issue becomes a crisis. In many relationships, couples therapy is not considered until issues persist for an average of six years. This delay can make it more difficult to repair or resolve concerns.

Couples therapy is also beneficial for partners who have made firm resolutions about the future of their relationship. A couple in a healthy relationship may seek counseling to increase intimacy or find new ways to connect with each other emotionally. Couples who have already decided to separate may pursue couples counseling in order to end their relationship on respectful terms.

People who are engaged to be married might also choose to seek premarital counseling. This can help couples explore areas of conflict or concern that may cause difficulty or dissatisfaction in their marriage. Therapy allows couples to discuss differences of opinion, personal values, and their expectations. Premarital counseling can uncover more issues than a couple originally meant to discuss. This may be beneficial, as it allows couples to evaluate whether they are truly compatible before marrying.

There are many advantages to engaging in couples therapy, but some situations are not improved by this approach. For example, in [domestic abuse](#) cases where violence is causing one partner to fear the other, couples therapy may not be enough. In some cases, a person's safety or life may be jeopardized if they remain in a relationship with an abusive partner. Victims of intimate partner abuse are encouraged to call the police or find a local crisis center in the event of an emergency.

How Effective is Couples Therapy?

Studies indicate couples therapy can have a marked positive impact on relationships. Research evaluating changes in marital satisfaction after therapy shows approximately 48% of couples reach improvement or full recovery in relationship satisfaction after 5 years. Approximately 38% of couples experienced relationship deterioration, and 14% remained unchanged over the same period.

Couples therapy is most effective when both partners are committed to improving their relationship and sticking to the treatment plan. The approach is much less effective if one partner refuses to participate in treatment or the relationship is violent or abusive. Effectiveness of couples therapy is also reduced when those in the relationship only expect their partner to change. The more open each member of the relationship is to reflecting on their own perspectives and habits, the more effective couples therapy is likely to be.

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