

# Notes to a couple on how to get the most from couples therapy

ELLYN BADER and PETER PEARSON

How do couples make the most of therapy when they often have no idea about what to expect or how to make the most of their time with the couples therapist? Typically, couples arrive at therapy with well-rehearsed stories of their partner's bad behavior, a focus on whatever problem happens to be on someone's mind at the time, or no idea where to begin. These common, but unproductive, patterns require early intervention to clear the way for more productive considerations such as the couple's shared and individual vision of the life they want to build together, the kind of partner they aspire to be and what blocks them from achieving this, and learning the necessary skills and knowledge to accomplish these tasks. ELLYN BADER and PETER PEARSON have developed this handout as a helpful springboard for their work with couples and as a means to help partners take more responsibility for their work with the therapist.

**C**ouples often begin therapy without much knowledge about couples therapy and with little idea about how to prepare for sessions or make the most of their sessions. We developed this handout as a helpful springboard for our work with couples and as a means to help partners take more responsibility for their work with us.

When the initial appointment is made, couples are asked to go to our website and read this article before the first meeting. The intent is to help them reduce the tendency to rehearse stories of their partner's bad behavior.

One of the first questions we ask is if they read the article and what stood out for them. Couples unanimously appreciate getting a glimpse of how we think about therapy and how we think about our meetings.

However, this kind of document is not easy to write. It forces you to think more clearly about what you expect of yourself and the couples you work

with. What you will read below is the result of multiple drafts and revisions. Please use what we have written as a framework to stimulate a similar document that reflects your own thoughts and approaches to effective couples therapy.

## Introduction

This document is designed to help you get the most benefit from our work together. The first section is on how to prepare for our sessions together. The second section is a summary of brief concepts about relationships and productive couples work.

As your therapist, my primary role is to help you improve your responses to each other without violating your core values or deeply held principles. Your job is to create your own individual objectives for being in therapy. Like a good coach, my job is to help you realize them. I have many tools to help you become an effective partner, but they work best when you are clear about how you aspire to be.

## Preparing for our sessions

The major aim of therapy is to increase your knowledge about yourself, your partner and the patterns of interaction between you. Therapy becomes effective as you apply new knowledge to break old ineffective patterns and develop better ones.

The key tasks of couples therapy are to increase your clarity about:

- the kind of life you want to build together and individually;
- the kind of partner you aspire to be in order to build the kind of life and relationship you want to create;
- your individual blocks to becoming the kind of partner you aspire to be;
- the skills and knowledge necessary to do the above tasks.

## What to avoid in our sessions

A common, yet unproductive, pattern in couples therapy is to focus on whatever problem happens to be on someone's mind at the moment. This is a reactive and mostly ineffective approach to working things through.

The second unproductive pattern is for you to show up and say, *"I don't know what to talk about, do you?"* While this blank slate approach may open some interesting doors, it is a disorganized, reactive hit or miss process.

The third major unproductive pattern is to discuss whatever fight you are in at the moment or whatever

be more respectful, more giving, more appreciative and so on. It takes effort to remember and act.

The third compromise is comfort. You'll give up some emotional comfort by going out on a limb to try novel ways of thinking or doing things. It will be uncomfortable to listen with curiosity instead of butting in, and to speak up instead of becoming

you to improve your sensitivity instead of hoping the other will stop ignoring or criticizing.

In all these areas, there is generally a conflict between short-term gratification and the long-term goal of creating a satisfying relationship. The blunt reality is that, in an interdependent relationship, effort is required on the part of each person to make a sustained improvement. It is like pairs figure skating—one person cannot do most of the work and still create an exceptional team.

A more powerful approach is for each person to do the following before each session:

- reflect on your objectives for being in therapy;
- think about your next step that supports or relates to your larger objectives for the kind of relationship you wish to create, or the partner you aspire to become.

This reflection takes some effort. Yet few people would call an important meeting and then say, *"Well, I don't have anything to bring up, does anyone else have anything on their agenda?"* Your preparation will pay high dividends.

## *A common, yet unproductive, pattern in couples therapy is to focus on whatever problem happens to be on someone's mind at the moment.*

fight you had since our last meeting. Discussing these fights or arguments without a larger context of what you wish to learn from the experience is often an exercise in spinning your wheels.

Over time, repeating these patterns will lead to the plaintive question, *"Are we getting anywhere yet?"* By the time that question is asked, the answer is painfully obvious.

### **What to do instead**

You can't create a flourishing relationship by only fixing what's wrong. But it's a start. To create sustained improvement in your relationship you need:

- a vision of the life you want to build together and individually;
- to strengthen appropriate attitudes and skills;
- communication skills to work as a team;
- the motivation to persist; and
- time to review progress.

To create the relationship you really desire, there will be some difficult trade-offs and tough choices for each person.

The first trade off will be time. It takes time to create a relationship that flourishes: time to be together, time to play, plan, coordinate, nurture, relax, hang out, family time, etc. This time will encroach on some other valuable areas—your personal or professional time.

The second trade off is energy. It takes effort to sustain improvement over time: staying conscious of making slow, gradual progress, remembering to

resentfully compliant or withdrawing. At the beginning, there will be emotional risk-taking action but you will never explore different worlds if you always keep sight of the shoreline.

There is one more trade off that's even more difficult for some people: improving your reaction to problems. For example, if one of you is hypersensitive to criticism, and the other is hypersensitive to feeling ignored, it will take effort from each of

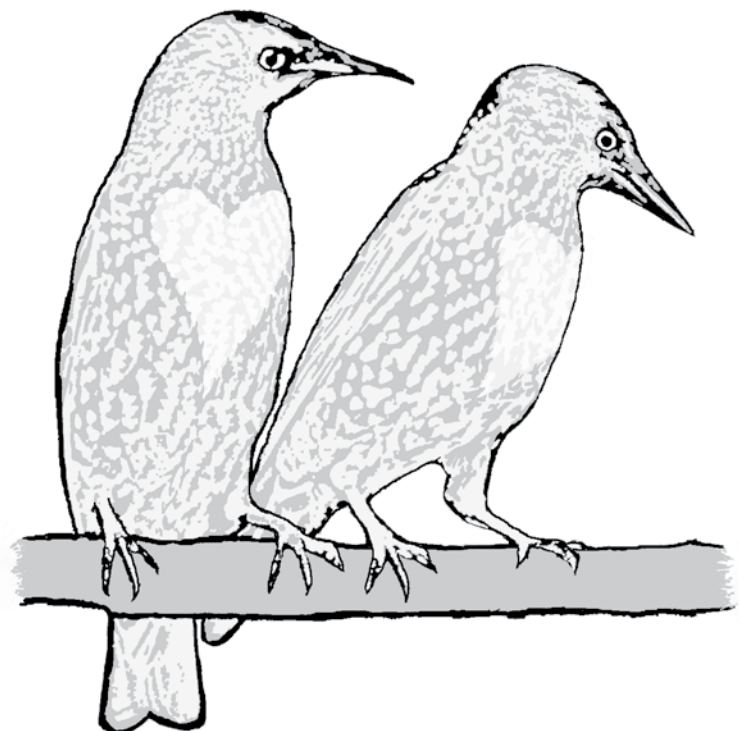
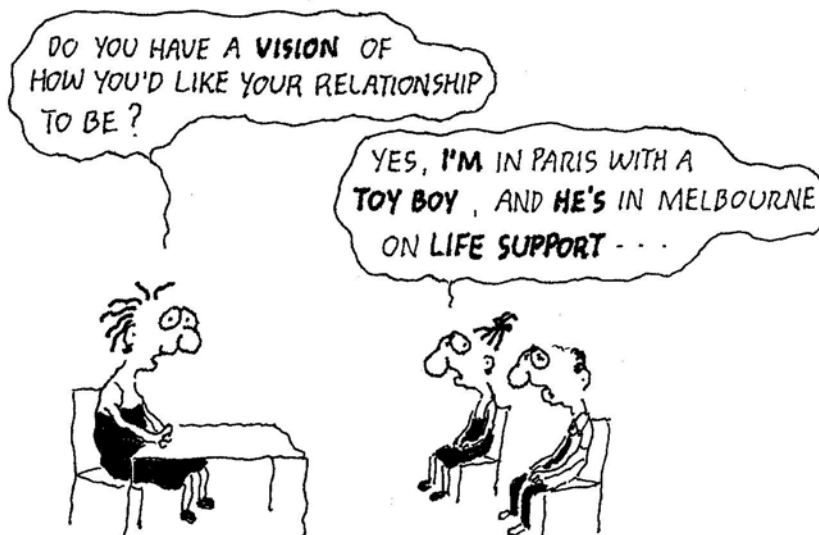


Illustration: Savina Hopkins



J. WRIGHT

### Important concepts for couples therapy and relationships

The following ideas can help identify areas of focus in your work or stimulate discussion between you and your partner between meetings:

#### *Attitude is key*

When it comes to improving your relationship, your attitude toward change is more important than what action to take. What to do and how to do it can often be identified easily. The real challenge is why you don't do it.

How to think differently about a problem is often more effective than just trying to figure out what action to take. Your partner is quite limited in his/her ability to respond to you. You are quite limited in your ability to respond to your partner. Accepting this is a huge step into maturity.

There is a definite possibility that you have some flawed assumptions about your partner's motives. And that he/she has some flawed assumptions about yours. The problem is that most of the time we don't want to believe those assumptions are flawed.

#### *Focus on changing yourself rather than your partner*

Couples therapy works best if you have more goals for yourself than for your partner. I am at my best when I can help you reach objectives you set for yourself.

Problems occur when reality departs sharply from our expectations, hopes,

desires and concerns. It is human nature to try to change one's partner instead of adjusting our expectations. This aspect of human nature is what keeps therapists in business.

#### *Improving your response*

The hardest part of couples therapy is accepting you will need to improve your response to a problem (how you think, feel or what you do about it). Very few people want to focus on improving their response. It's more common to build a strong case why the

other should do the improving.

You can't change your partner. Your partner can't change you. You can influence each other, but that doesn't mean you can change each other.

You can learn a lot about yourself by understanding what annoys you and how to handle it. The more you believe your partner should be different, the less initiative you will take to change the patterns between you.

Becoming a more effective partner is the most efficient way to change a relationship. Couples therapy works best if you have more goals for yourself than for your partner.

#### *Conflict as a key to harmony?*

All significant growth comes from disagreements, dissatisfaction with the current status, or striving to make things better. Paradoxically, accepting that conflict produces growth and learning to manage inevitable disagreements is the key to more harmonious relationships.

All major goals have built in contradictions; for example, speak up vs. keep the peace.

It's easy to be considerate and loving

*If you want to create a win-win solution, you cannot hold a position that has caused your partner to lose in the past.*

to your partner when the vistas are magnificent, the sun is shining and the breezes are gentle. But when it gets bone chilling cold, you're hungry and tired and your partner is whining and sniveling about how you got them into this mess, that's when you get tested. Your leadership and your character get tested. You can join the finger pointing or become how you aspire to be.

#### *Some tough questions*

In a strong disagreement, do you really believe that your partner is entitled to their opinion?

Under duress, and when the stakes

are high, do you have the courage and tenacity to seek your partner's reality and the courage to express your reality?

Why is it important to let your partner know what you think, feel and are concerned about? (Because they really can't appreciate what they don't understand.)

What price will your partner have to pay to improve their response to you? How much do you care about the price they will have to pay? (Everything has a price and we always pay it.)

Can you legitimately expect your partner to treat you better than you treat him/her?

Can you legitimately expect your partner to treat you better than you treat yourself?

If you want your partner to change, do you think about what *you* can do to make it easier?

When a problem shows up it is natural to think *'What should I do about it?'* A more productive question is *'How do I aspire to be in this situation?'*

### **The importance of communication**

The three most important qualities for effective communication are respect, openness and persistence. You can learn to do these things even if other people don't do them for you.

Good communication is much more difficult than most people want to believe. Effective negotiation is even harder. We are all responsible for how we express ourselves, no matter how others treat us.

### **Some final thoughts**

Even with the best of intentions, grace under pressure does not spring full-grown—practice, practice and more practice of the right things and you will get there.

Love is destroyed when self-interest dominates.

If you don't know what you feel in important areas of your relationship, it is like playing high stakes poker when you see only half of your cards. You will make a lot of dumb plays.

The possibility exists that we choose partners we need, but don't necessarily want.

To get to the bottom of a problem often means you first accept how complex it is.

Trust is the foundational building block of a flourishing relationship. You create trust by doing what you say you will do.

It's impossible to be in a highly inter-dependent relationship without ever being judgmental or being judged.

If you strive to always feel emotionally safe in your relationship and achieve this, you will pay the price by becoming dull. If neither of you ever rocks the boat, you will end up with a dull relationship.

Most of the ineffective things we do in relationships fall into just a few categories:

- blame or attempt to dominate;
- disengage/withdraw;
- resentful compliance;
- whine;
- denial or confusion.

These are the normal emotional reactions to feeling a threat or high stress. Improving your relationship means better management of these reactions.

If you are asking your partner to change something, sometimes it's a good idea to ask if the change is consistent with how they aspire to be in that situation.

Businesses and marriages fail for the same three reasons. A failure to:

- learn from the past;
- adapt to changing conditions;
- predict probable future problems and take action.

Effective change requires insight plus action. Action without insight is thoughtlessness. Insight without action is passivity.

If you want to create a win-win solution, you cannot hold a position that has caused your partner to lose in the past.

### **Notes**

© The Couples Institute

As always, we share our material in the hope that it promotes better couples therapy and improved relationships for couples around the world. We urge you to create a similar document that reflects your own thoughts and approaches to couples therapy for your clients. If you find this document such a good match that you couldn't say it better yourself, be sure to include the heading with *The Couples Institute* and our names as authors on your copies.

### **AUTHOR NOTES**

ELLYN BADER Ph.D. and PETER PEARSON Ph.D. are clinical psychologists, and the founders and directors of The Couples Institute in Menlo Park, California. Known worldwide through their pioneering work in couples therapy, they are invited frequently to speak at major conferences and to conduct training in the psychological treatment of couples throughout the world. They are authors of *'In Quest of the Mythical Mate: a Developmental Approach to Diagnosis and Treatment in Couples Therapy'* and *'Tell Me No Lies: How to Stop Lying to You Partner – and Yourself – in the Four Stages of Marriage'* (with Judith Schwartz).

Drs. Bader and Pearson visit Australia with PsychOz Publications in March 2009 to present a two-day training *'The Search for the Mythical Mate: Integrating attachment, differentiation and neuroscience for effective couple therapy'*. Dr. Bader is also a Keynote Speaker for the 2009 AARC Conference.

For more information and resources visit [www.couplesinstitute.com](http://www.couplesinstitute.com)