

So How Do We Do It?

Ground Rules & Guidelines

The major aim of therapy is increasing your knowledge about yourself, your partner and the patterns of interaction between you. The hardest part of this is accepting you will need to improve your response to a problem (how you think about it, feel about it, or what to do about it). Very few people want to focus on improving their response. It's more common to build a strong case for why the other should do the improving.

Therapy becomes effective as you apply new knowledge to break ineffective patterns and develop better ones. Let's look at some of the logistics for how to make this work.

➤ **Make a commitment to the process.** Commit to attend a minimum of 12 weekly sessions with your partner, and to actively and openly participate in those sessions to the best of your ability.

This is not a magic number, but it generally gives enough time for the work to begin to become more integrated into your daily life. Of course this number will vary depending upon many factors including the issues you present with, how long you've been experiencing distress in your relationship, the presence of addictions or other mental health issues, etc. If your relationship is in crisis, coming more than once a week may be needed as you begin the work.

After experiencing significant progress, couples may choose to decrease the frequency of their sessions, e.g., come every other week. This can work, although is not recommended in the beginning. Think of it like learning any new skill. You need the regular repetition to keep up the learning and the motivation. After it becomes more habitual, then you can start to scale back.

➤ **Make the "No Exit" Decision.** This first means that you make no decision or threats to terminate your relationship during the course of the initial 12 weeks. Many times one or both parties will be thinking about separation when first coming; that is normal. The thoughts may still come. What you are asked to do is not to take action on them in order to give yourself the best opportunity for healing.

On a broader scale, this decision invites you to identify how you spend time and energy which might be better spent in your relationship. Examples include watching TV, working late, drinking, hobbies and recreational activities, sleeping late, even caring for your children. These are the diversions used as escapes or excuses not to be with your partner. Some can seem innocuous yet are quite harmful; they become ingredients of the "invisible divorce.

➤ **Expect and Work Through Setbacks.** Often the process starts out positive. You feel good about taking the step of calling, coming in for a first appointment and addressing things in that first session in a way which engenders some hope. At some point, something happens and you hit a snag, maybe even a crisis that dashes the hope and leaves you wanting to quit. What's happening is that it's tapping into your deepest issues around which there are lots of defenses. It's the part of the journey when you have to make the choice. It's also the part of the journey when some of the best work happens if you stick with it.

It's like an archeological dig. At first there is the excitement of searching for the treasure. Then you start digging and it becomes messy – it's dusty, dirty, draining and you just want to stop. But you keep going, and then the dust begins to clear and you find the treasure.

➤ **Do Your Homework (Part I).** Let's face it. None of us have liked homework since we were in the third grade. But if you want to maximize your learning, it is essential. Commit to completing homework exercises. Just like in third grade you'll feel resistance. But remember that the reason you're doing it is to create the relationship that you desire.

➤ **Do Your Homework (Part II).** The greatest coach of all-time, John Wooden, said "Failing to prepare is preparing to fail." A common yet unproductive pattern in couple therapy is making the focus of a session be 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 showing up and saying, "I don't know what to talk about, do you?" While this blank slate approach may open some interesting doors, it is a hit or miss process. The third common unproductive pattern is discussing whatever fight you are now in or whatever fight you had since the last meeting. Discussing these fights/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?"

A more powerful approach to your couple therapy sessions is for each person to do the following *before* each session:

1. Reflect on your objectives for being in therapy.
2. 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.

Tradeoffs and Tough Choices

To create sustained improvement in your relationship you need:

- *A vision of the life you want to build together*
- *To have a life separate from your partner because you are not joined at the hip*
- *The appropriate attitudes and skills to work as a team*
- *The motivation to persist*
- *Time to review progress*

Creating the relationship you really desire is making an investment in your future. Like any investment, it requires taking a risk without a guaranteed payoff. And like any investment, we do so because we believe it's worth it. Inherent in making this investment are some difficult tradeoffs and tough choices for each person.

The first tradeoff will be time. It simply takes time to create a relationship that flourishes: time to be together, time to be with family, time to play, coordinate, nurture, relax, hang out and plan. This time will encroach on some other valuable areas – your personal or professional time. In world which offers instant gratification, the time needed will test your patience and persistence.

The second tradeoff is money. This work is not cheap. Its value, however, cannot be measured in dollars and sense. Perhaps it is hard to accept that you must invest financially in the health of your relationship. Couples spend on average \$25,000 on their wedding yet often balk at spending a few hundred dollars on pre-marital counseling. Couples often push off therapy until problems become severe – when they will need much more extensive work, costing them even more. Others push it off until it's too late, with costing them on average from \$20,000 for an amicable divorce upwards to \$100,000 for a litigated divorce, not to mention the six figure amounts it will take to support two households. Don't be pennywise and pound foolish.

The third compromise is comfort. That means emotional comfort, like going out on a limb to try novel ways of thinking or doing things, listening and being curious instead of butting in, speaking up instead of becoming 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. In addition, few people are emotionally comfortable being confronted with how they don't live their values or being confronted with the consequences of their actions.

The other comfort that will be challenged is energy comfort. It simply takes effort to sustain improvement over time: staying conscious of making a difference over time, remembering to be more respectful, more giving, more appreciative etc. It takes effort to remember and act.

The other effort is even more difficult for some people: that is improving their reaction to problems. For example, if one person is hypersensitive to criticism, and his/her partner is hypersensitive to feeling ignored, it will take effort to improve their sensitivity instead of hoping the partner 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.

It Can Be Done!

All this may seem daunting to you, but I want you to know that it can be done. The first step is having the curiosity and openness to start the process. That's all. I will help you from there.

Start now. Contact me at: 310-268-7792 or Michael@DrMichaelD.com