

How to Make The Most of the Opportunities of Marriage Counseling **By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D, LMFT**

People seek marriage counseling because they need help or are in pain. In any given couple, there is usually one who is more interested in counseling than the other. With a list of complaints, each partner usually feels compelled to make his/her case to the counselor about their spouse being "the problem". Although initially both partners seem to have the agenda of having the counselor straighten out the other, the benefits of marital counseling can quickly guide the cooperative efforts of the partners for the benefit of the relationship. Marriage counseling can be viewed as block of opportunities, some of which include:

1. An opportunity to have a safe environment for identifying what is really bothering you and telling your spouse
2. An opportunity to learn and practice new communication and problem solving skills
3. An opportunity to work through pain and resentments
4. An opportunity to regain the ability to see the "positives" in your spouse and your relationship
5. An opportunity to work through unresolved emotional baggage from previous relationships (including family of origin)
6. An opportunity to identify the important and to learn to let go of the unimportant.
7. An opportunity to learn to forgive
8. An opportunity to eliminate toxic power struggles
9. An opportunity to learn the secrets of true intimacy, how to get it, and how to maintain it
10. An opportunity to get reacquainted with your beloved and to deepen your knowledge of him/her
11. An opportunity to establish goals and practice working together as a team
12. An opportunity to make the most of today together

Here are some tips on how to make the most of these opportunities:

1. Keep your appointments.
2. Do the homework and don't wait until the night before.
3. Practice your newly acquired skills between sessions.
4. Maintain your perspective about the goals of counseling-to solve problems rather than gain victories.
5. Let go of need to be right or maintain the upper hand.
6. Don't punish each other for risking in sessions.
7. Be willing to be generous, humble, and understanding.
8. Work hard to move quickly through the blaming stage and into the collaborative problem solving stage.

You get out of counseling what you are willing to put into it. You are not expected to go into counseling with the skills you need to solve the problems of the

relationship. You are expected to be willing to learn. To learn skills, you have to have an open mind and acceptance of the need to change. Sometimes partners enter counseling with the expectation that they can continue to do the same things over and over and that magically the counselor will make it work. The opportunities presented in marriage counseling can only be seized by having a willingness to change.

Copyright 2009, Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D. <http://www.peggyferguson.com>
Hubbard House Publishing, Stillwater, Oklahoma