

Why Seek Marriage Counseling- Whether High Conflict Or No Energy Left, Marriage Counseling Can Help

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Although some people still have some mystical, magical "shoulds" in their minds that say that "you should be able to solve your own problems without help", getting assistance for marital difficulties is now acceptable and commonplace. Many of your neighbors, office cohorts, and possibly even people in your own family, have sought and benefited from marital counseling. There are as many different reasons why people seek marital counseling as there are couples seeking it. Many things impact the marriage in today's society. Some couples deal with grave issues like infidelity, abuse, mental health issues or addiction, but many work on day to day living issues. Stress at work, financial worries, insecurity about your own skills, abilities or looks are all individual issues that impact the relationship. Many people get irritable or emotionally withdrawn as they seek to deal with the internal issues that are bothering them, instead of being able to reach for help from their spouse.

Ideally, a marriage is a place where you can talk about the issues that are bothering you and allow your partner to listen, accept your feelings, and love you. Often the marriage is not a place where this can happen. Sometimes this is because there are relationship difficulties that get in the way of the partners being able to be the spouse that they might like to be. Many relationship issues that bring couples into counseling involve unresolved conflicts. Often when partners try to resolve conflicts, because they don't quite know how to do that, they make matters worse with dirty fight tactics, with escalating and withdrawing, or by refusing to confront and deal with conflicts. When these things happen, it makes it more difficult to solve the same problem, issue, or conflict the next time that it comes up. When it re-emerges feelings have been hurt, partners have the expectation that they will not be able to resolve it, and may expect argument or additional conflict. The more frustrated that partners get the angrier and more resentful they become. After awhile a climate of hostility can develop and spouses begin to look at each other through "mad colored" glasses.

Communication can move away from intimate sharing between two people who love each other into a tense environment of resentment and/or punishment. Sometimes there is a reciprocal pattern of feeling hurt and punishing. With feeling hurt and angry it is no wonder that spouses are resistant to do "nice" things for each other, or to offer acceptance of the other person. Many couples begin to operate out of a sense of scarcity and take a self-centered stance of "what's in it for me". They may take a defensive posture and deflect any blame or criticism that they feel is being leveled against them. Couples may even believe that they communicate well and yet, still cannot effectively solve the problems in their marriage. There is often a difference between knowing how to communicate well and actually using good communication skills when they are most needed-in the midst of conflict and tension. When the atmosphere is one of "every man for himself", the future of the relationship seems bleak. It may feel as if there is no way

out of the hurt that you are experiencing. As you are trying harder and harder to make yourself understood by your partner, they are doing the same thing--stepping up their own demands--virtually guaranteeing that neither is being heard by the other. Each feels misunderstood and unimportant to the other.

This is a picture of a couple in conflict that are still engaging, and trying to find solutions to their marital problems. On the other hand, many couples stop engaging in problem solving, and in arguing as well. Some couples come into counseling as a last-ditch effort to save a marriage that one or both, have little motivation left to work on. They seem to have run out of energy and desire to try to change things. Perhaps they, (one or both) have felt unloved for a long time, and have stopped caring that that has happened. Perhaps they have tried to solve problems and issues for a long time and have accepted the partner as s/he is, and have accepted the relationship as it for a long time. Eventually, one may decide that it is time to divorce and they decide to give it one last effort. There is little life left in this marriage but it still may be saved.

How can marriage counseling help with these scenarios? Practicing communication skills developed by coaching, modeling, and risking can help create a trustworthy environment where you can once again feel the love that has been weighted down by the resentment, hurt, and anger. Marital counseling can help to produce an environment of safety where you can once again experience hope and restore self-confidence in getting your message to your beloved. You can feel relieved of the compulsion to "be understood" and can once again work "to understand your partner. You can return to feeling loved, cherished, and important. Marriage counseling can help you avoid divorce and help you rekindle the love and romance you crave. Even the lifeless, disengaged relationship can often be revitalized. The counselor can't do this, but with his or her guidance and teaching, you and your spouse can accomplish these things together.

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