

Using Cognitive Therapy to Change Your Marriage

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Couples often come to counseling in a last ditch effort to avoid divorce and save the marriage. They have many goals and objectives in mind, often involving helping the therapist fix the other spouse. The real underlying goal is often the desire to restore the positive feelings toward the spouse and to feel loved by the spouse. Invested in their own solutions, these same partners often go about trying to accomplish this goal by pointing out what their spouse is doing "wrong", how they "always" engage in undesirable [behavior](#) and "never" do the things that are requested.

In trying to accomplish the goal of communicating a desire to feel loved, important, and appreciated, spouses often act out feelings with angry, belittling, demanding, scolding, harassing, or withdrawing [behavior](#). These communication behaviors may be an attempt to say "Pay attention to me. I love you and miss how we used to feel", but the message communicated ends up being anything but that.

Very often, spouses are convinced that the other spouse is "the problem", and that the only possible solution is that the other spouse change. They come to counseling in a veritable stalemate. They each refuse to take risks and change their own [behavior](#) until the other spouse is changing according to their own criteria. They often continue to avoid spending time together and use the same old worn out excuses for doing so.

The reality is that you cannot achieve the goals of restoring the [intimacy](#) and positive feelings in your relationship without taking full responsibility for the part that you play in the problems and in the solutions. You cannot make any headway without taking risks, even if it seems that the other person is not changing and is not risking.

When partners begin to look at their interactions, identify their own areas of responsibility, and take steps to change their own feelings and behavior, the relationship begins to change. When a partner is able to challenge his or her own perceptions, to make sure that what s/he believes is absolutely the case (or to give the other partner the benefit of the doubt), there is room for change in attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about the partner. The belief about hurt feelings may change from seeing the partner as motivated to be mean, and as having an "I don't care" [attitude](#), to seeing the circumstances in which feelings were hurt as two people simply having conflicting needs at a moment in time. When you are able to question how you think about your relationship events, your feelings and reactions can change. Your overall [attitude](#) toward spouse changes and you can begin to feel loving toward your spouse again. Partners can begin to begin with [gratitude](#) for having their spouse still in their lives, and give consideration to what they can do that day to make life easier or better for their spouse. This would improve the quality of the interactions between partners. When this happens, partners often attribute the positive changes in the relationship to the other partner changing, when in fact, both partners are changing and contributing to solutions.

If you want to restore [happiness](#) to your [marriage](#), apply a little cognitive therapy to how you look at your spouse and your interactions.

These steps are taken from the ABCs of Rational Emotive Therapy (Albert Ellis), which has continued to be applied and refined, and is now often referred to as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Aaron Beck).

A. Activating Event. What happened?

Example: My husband tells me to dress warmly; its cold outside.

B. Belief about the event. What does it mean?

Example: My husband thinks I am an idiot and don't know that its cold outside.

C. Feelings about the event. How do I feel about what happened?

Example: I feel controlled and hurt.

D. My behavior/reactions.

Example: I say something sarcastic back to him in response.

Challenging Cognitive Distortions

A. Activating Event. Same Event.

Example: My husband tells me to dress warmly; its cold outside.

B. Belief about the event. What else could it mean? (Try to go for at least neutral interpretations, rather than more negative ones.)

Example: My husband's comment is a loving gesture, that says, "I am thinking of you and care about your health/comfort".

C. Feelings about the event based on other possible beliefs/meanings/interpretations.

Example: I feel happy.

D. My behavior/reactions. How might your behavior be different based on changed perceptions and feelings?

Example: I say "Thanks, Honey. You be warm and safe, too."

Many couples believe that they know without a shadow of a doubt, the nature of their partner's intentions and motivations, and that there is no other possible way to interpret or give meaning to an event besides the ways they already think about it. In reality, there are very few (if any) universally agreed upon meanings to any given situation or event. Every one has perceptual distortions, "filters", that color their experiences. With a little help and some practice, many of those "filters" can be identified and "neutralized", thereby making it easier to have healthy communication and positive interactions.

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