

# Using Cognitive Therapy to Change Your Marriage

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Couples often come to counseling as a last-ditch effort to avoid divorce and save their marriage. They have many goals and objectives, usually hoping the therapist will "fix" the other spouse. The underlying goal is typically to restore positive feelings toward each other and to feel loved again. However, these same partners often try to accomplish this by pointing out what their spouse is doing "wrong," how they "always" engage in undesirable behavior, and "never" do the things requested.

In their attempts to communicate a desire to feel loved, important, and appreciated, spouses often act out their feelings with angry, belittling, demanding, scolding, harassing, or withdrawing behavior. These behaviors might be an attempt to say, "Pay attention to me. I love you and miss how we used to feel," but the message communicated is often anything but that.

Very often, each spouse convinces themselves that the other spouse is "the problem" and that the only solution is for the other spouse to change. They come to counseling in a stalemate, each refusing to take risks and change their behavior until the other spouse changes according to their criteria. They often avoid spending time together and use the same old excuses for doing so. This avoidance begins to move them in separate directions. As spouses increasingly rely on these excuses, they create more physical and emotional distance between themselves. This distancing becomes a defense mechanism, protecting them from the discomfort and potential conflicts that arise when they are together.

Retreating into separate worlds shields them from the vulnerability and friction that intimacy can bring, leading to a gradual but persistent separation. This cycle of avoidance and justification further entrenches their beliefs that the other is "the problem," making reconciliation and genuine connection more challenging as time passes.

You cannot restore intimacy and positive feelings in your relationship without spending time together and taking full responsibility for your part in the problems and solutions. You must take risks to make headway, even if it seems the other person is not changing or taking risks.

When partners begin to examine their interactions, identify their areas of responsibility, and take steps to change their feelings and behavior, the relationship starts to change. When a partner challenges their perceptions to ensure accuracy (or gives the other partner the benefit of the doubt), there is room for change in attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about the partner. Hurt feelings may shift from viewing the partner as mean and uncaring to seeing the circumstances as two people simply having conflicting needs at a moment in time. When you question your thoughts about relationship events, your emotions and reactions can change. Your attitude toward your spouse can shift, allowing you to feel loving again.

Partners can begin by being grateful for having their spouse and considering what they can do daily to make life easier or better for their spouse. Gratitude improves the quality of interactions between partners. When this happens, partners often attribute the positive changes in the relationship to the other partner's change when both partners are changing and contributing to solutions.

If you want to restore happiness to your marriage, apply cognitive therapy to how you look at your spouse and your interactions. These steps are modified from the ABCs of Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (Albert Ellis), an early Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) model (e.g., Aaron Beck).

## **Cognitive Therapy for Marriage**

A. Activating Event: What happened?

Example: My husband tells me to dress warmly; it's cold outside.

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

Example: My husband thinks I am an idiot and doesn't know it's 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; it's cold outside.

B. Belief about the event: What else could it mean? (Aim 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 differ based on changed perceptions and feelings?

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

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

**Note:** This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2011 with the same title on this site, and similar article titled *Breaking the Stalemate: Using Cognitive Therapy to Change Your Marriage*, (2011) published at <https://selfgrowth.com/articles/breaking-the-stalemate-using-cognitive-therapy-to-change-your-marriage>. The content has been updated for contemporary language and concepts, clarity and accuracy.

**The Honey Jar:  
A Couples Communication Exercise  
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

When couples find themselves on separate paths, often avoiding each other and using familiar excuses to do so, it can be challenging to reconnect and rekindle the intimacy they once shared. "The Honey Jar: A Couple Communication Exercise" smooths reconnection. It offers a pathway to deeper connection and understanding between partners. It is a collection of 250 thoughtfully crafted sentence stems for meaningful conversations that help couples in long-standing relationships or new commitments enhance their communication, strengthen their bond, and reaffirm their commitment to one another. By dedicating time and energy to this exercise, couples can rekindle trust, reawaken positive regard, and rediscover the love hidden beneath the surface.



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