

Couples Counseling: What is it and How Can it Help Us?

Ryan Guetersloh, MFT

The relationships in our lives can be some of our most joyful as well as some of our most challenging experiences. Furthermore, our relationships can be extremely far reaching in the ways they impact each of us. We can be lifted up by our partner, or we can be brought down by a partner. Many times our relationships provide us with the support we need to be successful in school and professional life, and other times our relationships make it challenging to do anything else but tend to the relationship.

There can be a lot of stigma around couples counseling, as indeed there has been around counseling in general. However, at CaPS we feel that couples counseling can often be the most effective way of lowering personal stressors and improving the support you need to be successful.

What is couples counseling?

Couples counseling is when two people who are in a significant relationship meet with a trained counselor to address a variety of issues that affect their relationship. Examples of couple's issues may include communication, conflict, cultural issues, sexuality, infidelity, and family concerns. During the sessions, each person talks about the stressors and difficulties in the relationship, while exploring new ways to connect and communicate effectively. It is often helpful for the couple to talk about family background, history of this relationship, and what each needs from the other.

Couples counseling can help to increase the intimacy, connection, and joy people may experience when they are in healthy, vibrant relationships. Each person is encouraged to resolve conflicts with new tools, give feedback, improve listening skills, express feelings, and begin to better understand one another's hopes and needs.

It is the counselor's job to help make the counseling safe, help both partners to be heard, and to help the couple outline reasonable and achievable goals for the counseling. The counselor will not take sides but will help each partner to hear and to be heard in the sessions.

When should we seek couples counseling?

Couples counseling is not only for "married" people, but it is for any pair who want to increase commitment and intimacy toward each other. Some come for couples counseling when their relationship is stuck in a pattern of miscommunication and unproductive repetition.

Couples counseling can be helpful when you feel distant, frustrated, or disappointed in your relationship. Often couples work toward increasing and improving their relationships; however, in some situations couples come to counseling to facilitate a healthy "good-bye" to the relationship.

What happens in couples counseling sessions?

When you meet your counselor, (s)he will ask you some questions about your background, your relationship, and what brings you into counseling now. As you begin to talk about your relationship, there may be some areas you specifically want to work on such as increasing listening skills, resolving conflicts more effectively, gaining a deeper understanding of your partner's needs and how to meet them (and vice versa), as well as creating healthier ways to relate to each other and increase intimacy.

Trust and safety are established during the first few sessions. During this time, you have the opportunity to speak openly and honestly about what concerns you. As trust increases, you can begin to listen to one another in a less defensive and more productive way. As you work on new relationship skills that deepen your understanding of each other, your counselor may ask you to try different ways of appreciating each other, communicating, or addressing conflict.

You can work on specific problems while increasing your understanding of what you and your loved one needs. You may wish to talk with your counselor about issues related to conflict, communications, sexuality, cultural issues, finances, decision-making, family issues, as well as day-to-day problems. This is not an exhaustive list of possible issues.

What does NOT happen in couples counseling?

It is common for you to be somewhat anxious when coming to couples counseling. You may be dealing with some difficult issues in your relationship and might feel that talking those issues will only make it worse. You may not experience immediate results, but many couples who put in the time and effort find that counseling can be very helpful.

Difficult issues are addressed in couples counseling, but only when you are ready to do so. You have the choice to not talk about something that is beyond your comfort zone. Safety and trust must be established for counseling to be effective. Blaming and shaming of individuals is not helpful in working toward intimacy and connection. Your counselor will not "take sides," but will facilitate a productive interchange between you and your partner. Respect and caring are building blocks toward healthier relationships. All information shared in couple counseling is completely confidential (within the limits of the law). Information is not shared with anyone else without your signed consent.

How does couples counseling work at CaPS?

To be seen as a couple at CaPS, at least one of you must be a currently registered CSUEB student. The first counseling session is called a couples consultation, and there is no fee for this consultation session. When both partners of a couple are CSUEB students, there is no fee for couples counseling. If one partner is not a CSUEB student, then there is a \$25.00 fee for each session beyond the couple's consultation.

Each couple is unique, and the number of sessions a couple may need differs. Most commonly, couples work with their counselor once a week for about 50 minutes each session.

Getting Started in Couples Counseling

You probably have some goals in mind to work on in couples counseling. You may have decided that you want to make certain changes in your relationship. It can oftentimes be very helpful to better define what your issues and concerns for your relationship are. Each partner should complete this sheet. Mark areas of concern for you in your relationship and fill in your responses to the questions.

Name _____

Areas of concern:

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anger | <input type="checkbox"/> Religion | <input type="checkbox"/> Communication |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Arguments | <input type="checkbox"/> Living Situation | <input type="checkbox"/> Love |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sexuality | <input type="checkbox"/> Family Issues | <input type="checkbox"/> Drugs/Alcohol |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Money/Finances | <input type="checkbox"/> Infidelity | <input type="checkbox"/> Fighting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Culture | <input type="checkbox"/> Abuse | <input type="checkbox"/> Affection |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (write in) | | |
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What could you do to be a better partner?

What would you be willing to shift or change about yourself to benefit the relationship?

What are the strengths of this relationship?

What does your partner do that shows you he or she cares about you?