

## Benefits and Risks of Couples Therapy

The goal of couple's therapy is to improve some aspect of the relationship. This often means expanding the capacity to communicate, to feel one another's emotions, to entertain and value the other person's point-of-view, to meet one another's physical and psychological needs, to overcome past issues, to avoid unhealthy cycles of communication, and so on. In many ways it involves broadening the capacity to relate to one another, though it also requires that each person make individual efforts to encourage those changes. It requires that one be open enough that they can question their own behaviors and to gain greater insight into their own motives, emotions, and possible deficiencies in relating to their partner. It may force us to challenge our own beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and values. For some, it can involve navigating through uncomfortable emotional territory – perhaps for the first time. The hope is that in the end, the short-term challenges and discomforts will be rewarded by a renewed sense of hope and by virtue of experiencing one another in a deeper and more meaningful way.

However despite these intended benefits, there are also some risks involved in couple's therapy. To appreciate what I mean, it can be helpful to think about the idea that all relationships, even unhealthy ones, 'work' in some way. That is, every relationship will naturally find some sense of stability, homeostasis, or equilibrium in the patterns of relating to one another. We naturally gravitate toward a complementary pattern of relating that fits together, or else the relationship falls apart. Sometimes the pattern or 'fit' between two people will be determined by what we bring into the relationship. For example, someone who is used to minimizing their own needs or feelings would be a complementary 'fit' for someone who lacks emotional intelligence or who is emotionally neglectful. Likewise, a person who has a lot of self-doubt, self-criticism, and who frequently second-guesses themselves, would be a good 'fit' with someone who is domineering, critical, and overpowering with their own views and opinions. The relationship in a sense 'works,' since we find ourselves in those familiar patterns that we know. But they may be psychologically unhealthy.



In therapy, the dynamic is challenged to gently move it in a more healthy direction, though this can put a lot of strain on a relationship as well. If one person is doing all the change, and the other stays the same, it threatens the 'fit' between two people – the relationship no longer 'works' in the way that it did before. If this is not reconciled within a reasonable period of time, the strain can cause the relationship to come to an end. It is also quite common that one person in the relationship may implicitly resist change, since it may be foreign or emotionally uncomfortable to them on some level. For this reason, it can be helpful to have a third party clinician involved to help assess who is in greater need of support at a given time, to assess where the relationship is getting stuck, and whether one person may need to 'budge' a bit more in order to encourage a new pattern of communicating. In sum, it is important to consider both the risks and benefits of therapy, but the goal is often worth it: to create a new 'normal' – an interpersonal dynamic based on a more healthy way of relating to one another.