

Ask Your Therapist

By Krishnabai, MSW, LICSW, the Ashby Center for Counseling

Getting Your Spouse to Couples' Counseling

My first column about couples' therapy generated quite a few questions from readers. The most common question was this: How do I get a reluctant spouse to come to therapy? The short answer is - you don't. Here is my long answer.

It is a myth that people fall in love and live happily ever after and yet we hold on tightly to that illusion and use it as a yard stick for our own relationships. I hear so many delusions that have grown from that myth: "You should know what I need without me having to ask you", "If you loved me you would", "I gave my whole life to him/her." Many people are so invested in that myth that it is very difficult for them to take a look at the problems in their relationship without feeling like a failure! To go to counseling is to admit a perception of failure, which is hard to do. It is much easier to just soldier on and be numb to the pain, or to make it your partner's problem and not yours. "If you have a problem, you go. I'm fine."

An essential understanding of relationships is this: **Love is not agreement, disagreement is not criticism, and people change over time.** It is very common to hear people talk about their new love in terms of how they are so much alike. But relationships are made up of two individuals, two separate people with separate histories, beliefs, experiences, hopes, dreams and desires. A relationship is formed from all those differences as well as similarities. So when the differences outweigh the similarities, tension often arises. Our attachment to our similarities can cause us to feel disappointed. "She's not who I thought she was" and "He's changed" are common complaints.

Couples' therapy is not meant to get one of the spouses to change a behavior to suit the other person. It is meant to help the couple see where they started, where they have evolved into, and to give each person a chance to say what they would like to give and to receive, what they need, want, and cannot accept, and then find a way to work to a mutual goal. "If I stop yelling at you, will you stop coming home late?" "If you help me with the kids more I will have more energy for you later in the evening." "If you are not willing to get help for your addiction, I will not live with you anymore." And then you have to do the changes you offer.

I want to make a plug here for pre-marital counseling so that couples can develop a common language and vision of where they want to go. But if you are way past that, couples' counseling can help you to negotiate your differences and discover new (and perhaps delightful) aspects of your beloved. Life is too long and too short to live in an unhappy relationship.

Krishnabai, MSW is a therapist in Ashby and Wellesley Hills where she sees adults, older teens and couples. The core of her work is the discovery and

expression of the Authentic Self. She focuses on the identification, expression, and resolution of emotions, commitment to honesty and the use of remedial education and information.

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