

COUPLES THERAPEUTIC RESOURCE SESSION

Solution-Oriented Ideas

About Relationships

Getting Therapy Started Right

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How Can the Couples Therapeutic Resource Session Help You?

Here are some ideas we hope will help you make positive changes in your relationship(s). We provide these ideas to you at the start of therapy because they often help speed up therapy. In fact, some couples are able to use these ideas to make changes in their relationships without pursuing further therapy.

Often couples know they want change but are unsure where to start or how to make it happen. The ideas we present here can provide a structure for considering and beginning change and can help you begin to get more of what you want out of your relationship – and sooner rather than later.

There are many ways and places to start making changes in your relationship. These ideas present a few that have helped many couples. As you think about these ideas, please make them your own. Try them out. Experiment with them. Modify them to fit your needs, your personality, your relationship. These ideas are tools to be used as you see fit.

Trouble is Normal

Trouble is a normal part of life and a normal part of relationships. A good relationship is not one *absent* of trouble, it's one where you can *work through* troubles.

Often people think that “smart” is knowing all the answers; They believe that if you’re smart, you can prevent problems, but that’s not true. Smart is being able to work through or around a problem.

Arguing Well Instead Of Not Arguing At All

Rather than finding ways to stop arguing, find ways to argue well.

You can tell more about love by the way a couple argues than when they’re romancing one another. It’s easy to be “in love” when you’ve got a beautiful setting, candle light, music and are focused on one another with interest and enthusiasm. It’s much more difficult to remain in love while arguing, yet those who do stay “in love” longer.

Getting More of What You Want Instead of Resolving Issues

Rather than resolving issues, find ways to get more of what you want.

Some issues are unresolvable, but that doesn’t mean you can’t have a more satisfying relationship. Some issues can be tolerated or worked around. Often, when someone has more of what they want in their relationship, it makes it easier for them to tolerate or work around unresolvable issues.

John Gottman, Ph.D. learned this from his research: unresolvable issues at the beginning of a relationship can continue to be unresolved

throughout the relationship – even relationships that have survived 20, 30, 40 or more years! The good news is that relationships can survive unresolvable issues!

State What You WANT Affirmatively

State what you *want* in your relationship, not what you *don't want*. Stating what you want is more specific than stating what you don't want. It may be harder for you to be specific, but it's easier for your partner.

Think of how you order a meal at a restaurant: If you try to tell the waiter everything on the menu you don't want, you will probably irritate the waiter and never get what you want! If instead you tell the waiter what you do want, he goes to the kitchen and brings it to your table!

Your Preferred Relationship

What kind of relationship do you *want* to have? Work at creating *that* relationship. Create relationship goals.

If you want a relationship built on love, create more love. If you want a relationship built on respect, create more respect. The more you create, the more you have at least what you've created!

Your Preferred Experience Of Yourself In Your Relationship

How do you want to feel in your relationship? Find ways to create that feeling for yourself – whether your partner joins in or not.

If you want to feel more love in your relationship, create more love. You can enjoy the feeling of being loving and appreciate your success in increasing your experience of love in your relationship.

Change Yourself Even if Your Partner isn't Changing

Be willing to change yourself. Hard as it is to change yourself, it's easier to change yourself than to change someone else.

Often couples come to therapy with great ideas about what their partner could do to make things better. They're usually right! If the other would just do what they say, things probably would be better! But they don't. Either they don't do it, or they can't do it right or it ends up not having the effect both were hoping for.

Be willing to change yourself – whether your partner is willing or can change or not. If you change, if you start doing things more to your liking, if you try creating more of what you want in your life and in your relationship, you'll get more, whether your partner ever joins you or not. Often, however, partners are moved by your efforts.

It's like a dance: You change your steps and your partner has to change theirs. S/He may not join the dance you want (yet) but they will have to do something different – the dance will not be the same.

Doing Love vs. Being In Love

Love is a performative act. You must create it. It's something you *do*, not something you *receive*. No one is satisfied by *passive* love.

Make the kind of relationship you want. Generate the kind of love you want.

Often people do not just enjoy receiving love, but the feeling of wanting or needing to give it! If you begin by giving it, at least you'll have that part of the equation and you increase the chances that your partner will reciprocate.

Do you believe in reciprocation in a relationship? Often if one partner is angry, the other partner will join in. Often, if one partner is doing love, the other becomes inspired to join in too!

The Language of Relationship

How you think about your relationship affects how you experience your relationship. The language you use can increase the chances of your creating your preferred relationship, or it can limit the possibilities. Here are some languaging ideas that may help change the way you think about, approach and create or re-create your relationship.

Ways – My Way, Your Way, Our Way vs. Right Way Wrong Way

Often couples express their preferences as, “This is the right way, that is the wrong way.” The effect of this is really, “My way is the right way, your way is the wrong way.” So, since *we* must do it the *right* way, that means *you* must do it *my* way.

What happens when you do this? Often your partner becomes defensive when accused of being *wrong*. It's a lot harder to get more of what you want with someone when they're defensive. Besides, they're not fooled by your *right* way. They know what's really right – *their* way! And as every right person knows, when you're right, you've got support for your being right, you've got the authorities who agree with and support your rightness. Invoking those authorities might sound like:

- “My mother, she knows how you are!”
- “My therapists says...”
- “Any good husband/wife knows that...”
- “Just look at _____'s relationship” (best friend, parents, TV couple, etc)
- “God is on my side!”

Often these claims are followed by something like: “Why can't you just get it?”

It's not a matter of “getting it.” It's a matter of thinking “my way and your way” instead of “right way and wrong way.” If you think of “my way and your way” there's room for negotiation. Instead of

battling about who's right and who's wrong, you negotiate with one another: "Are we going to do this your way, my way, mostly your way, a little my way, or our way?"

When you negotiate, you are not working toward "compromise." Often "compromise" feels "compromising." When you negotiate, you are working toward getting more of what you want. What you want may be the outcome of the particular negotiation, it may be getting more of what you want in the process of negotiation or something else – the possibilities for getting more of what you want are tremendous!

The benefit of finding "our" way is that it doesn't feel "compromising." It feels like a win/win. "Our" way is the result of consideration and negotiation of my way and your way. Our way is success!

Making Meaning in Dialogue, Not Monologue

Often we make meaning of something without consulting anyone else. This is making meaning in monologue rather than dialogue. *Talk with one another.* In talking with one another you create the meaning together.

My wife was once a florist. One day I was feeling very in love with her and wanted to send her that message with a bouquet of flowers. I went to the flower shop, examined the flower arrangements, chose the best one, spent a lot of money for the purchase, and sent the flowers to my wife at work. Then I waited for her to call me, to enthusiastically return a message of love.

I waited for her call, but when none was forthcoming, I called my wife and discreetly asked how her day was going. She mentioned receiving flowers from me and said, "Thank you," in an uninspired tone. I was very disappointed.

The meaning I made in monologue of this event: My wife is ungrateful and unloving.

The meaning she made in monologue of this event: My husband is insulting and unloving.

How did she come to this meaning? Because she was a florist, she knew that the arrangement I was impressed with was a "standard, low-grade" flower arrangement florists "throw together" with unimpressive flowers. Receiving this bouquet suggested to her that I was somehow angry at and insulting her.

If we had not talked about the meanings we were each making of this event, we probably would have gone home, said nothing, and eventually argued about something stupid – something completely unrelated to the flowers.

But because we talked in dialogue, we understood each other's meanings and intentions and were able to feel closer to one another even though the event didn't go the way either of us wanted.

Attending to Intentions and Effects, Not Just Results

When couples are trying to make changes, they are often looking for results. Intentions get forgotten. It is important to appreciate intentions, especially when trying new changes. Often new changes are awkwardly or incorrectly performed. *Give them a chance.* If you appreciate the intentions, you are supporting developments that can turn into long lasting and satisfying changes, producing the effects you were looking for!

A couple decided to tell one another "I love you" more often. They had been out of practice for many years and at first the words came out creaky. Had they only been interested in results, they might have complained that the performance was lackluster, that "I love you" needed to be said with more conviction, more like Mel Gibson than Danny Devito. The effects of the complains may have been an end to the efforts to try to connect more and to increase their "I love you's."

By attending to intentions, the couple was able to appreciate the developing practice and habit and continue with the behaviors until they were more to their liking.

Solution-Oriented Exercises

Consider these questions. Notice what effect the answers you create have on your interest and efforts to make positive changes in your relationship. Talk with your partner about your answers and listen to theirs. See what kind of conversation develops.

Why is your relationship important to you?

What kind of relationship do you want to have?

How do you want to experience your best self in your relationship?

How do you want to experience your partner's best self in your relationship?

What are your relationship goals?

What are you willing to do to make changes in your relationship – whether or not your partner makes an effort?

What is happening in your relationship right now that you would like to see continue?