

This Is What Couples Therapy Can Actually Solve

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Thinking about making a last-ditch effort to avoid a breakup? Here's everything you need to know beforehand and how to make the most of it.



HBO

After eight months of constant nitpicking from your partner, a lack of effort on your end, and hours of silent treatment (both of you, let's be honest), you find yourselves on the verge of a breakup. But you're not sure that you want to just walk away from this relationship. Yes, that girl in your spin class is bangin' hot and you think there might be something there—there isn't—but you've known your partner *forever*, and

remember that one fun vacation you took to Vancouver? Also, moving is expensive, and do you really want to sort through your bookshelves to bicker over who gets the copy of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*? No, you don't. So you two decide to give couples therapy a try as a final Hail Mary to save your relationship.

And the sooner you get in therapy, the better. The longer you wait, the more entrenched bad relationship habits (yelling, ignoring, prioritizing Super Smash Brothers instead of date nights) become and the harder it is to break them. Unfortunately, people tend to see couples therapy as an emergency measure, rather than a preventative one. It's the equivalent of not worrying about those chest pains until you're in an ambulance on the way to the hospital in full cardiac arrest.

While couples therapy can certainly help in many situations, it isn't the miracle overnight solution some people believe it to be. I spoke to two therapists who specialize in it—Sandra Espinoza, a licensed marriage and family therapist, and Harel Papikian, a doctor of psychology—to find out what couples therapy can actually solve and how to make the most of it.

- 1. You are not the client. The couple is the client.** Most couples therapists have what they call a "No Secrets Rule." That means everything you share individually with the therapist is also shared with the other partner. For example, you can't divulge an affair to your therapist and then expect them to conceal that from your partner. "We don't [keep secrets] because now the therapist has formed an alliance with one partner, which could aggravate the mistrust that's already in the relationship," Espinoza says. Also, don't expect one partner to be the focus of the therapy. Yes, even if that partner was the one who cheated. Even if they're

the one with the drinking problem. Or even if they're the one who isn't interested in sex anymore. This is about the both of you as a unit, not either of you as individuals.

2. **Make an effort. For your own sake.** One of the hardest things for couples who are deciding whether or not to break up is that that ambivalence often makes them reluctant to do the work. But doing this work will help *you* no matter what becomes of the relationship. Human beings behave in patterns. "Whether we leave the relationship or not, we can never leave our baggage behind—it will follow us wherever we go, until we resolve it," Dr. Papikian says. Neglect to do so and it's likely you'll repeat the same unhealthy behaviors and follow the same patterns in your *next* relationship, too.
3. **It's going to take a lot of time.** All that work I just described? It's probably going to suck, because guess what? In the immortal words of Blink 182, "Work sucks, I know." You're going to be asked to do an ass ton (medical term) of emotional labor: to be vulnerable about your desires, to be honest about what you don't like about your relationship, and to be open to hearing criticism of your own actions. Of course it'll be enlightening and fulfilling. But it will *also* be painful and grueling and uncomfortable a lot of the time. Espinoza says many couples come in shortsightedly expecting therapy to be a magic wand. But, just as it took some time for the relationship to deteriorate to this low point, it's going to take a while to get it back on track and functional. Changing the course of a relationship is like pulling a U-turn in a cruise ship, not a mini cooper. While the specific number of sessions depends entirely on the couple and the approach of their therapist, on average, you can expect to spend anywhere from 12-30 hours, according to the therapists I spoke to. At one hour a week, that means it can take over six

months of weekly sessions to get to a point where a couple feels like they're ready to stop going to therapy.

4. **Relationships are all about patterns. Therapy is all about changing those patterns.** Espinoza used the example of a client who comes to her complaining about their partner not wanting to do the dishes, so they yell at their partner, who in turn storms off. But, as I'm sure you know by now, this person's dissatisfaction is not *really* about the dishes. More likely, it's about feeling unsupported or undervalued. In any case, the underlying problem that presents as annoyance about the dishes doesn't stop with the dishes. It seeps into other parts of the relationship. With couples therapy, "ultimately the goal is to change the patterns of relating and create the love we want," says Dr. Papikian.
5. **Your therapist is not going to tell you what to do.** You might already know that a therapist cannot give advice. (I know, booooo!) Besides, Dr. Papikian explains, "knowing the right thing to do is far removed from actually doing it. Most couples know that their arguments are futile, hurtful, and unproductive, but it doesn't stop them from having them." (Plus, friends and family are usually more than willing to give you perfectly biased advice if that's what you're looking for.) Along the same line, therapists are not arbitrators. They cannot—and will not—decide which of you is correct about the ending of *Inception* or whether it's actually important to separate lights and darks in the wash. Their job is to identify patterns that you and your partner engage in, and then to help you change those patterns, by responding with kindness instead of snapping, or by opening up about what you really need rather than shutting down. Anything that repeatedly presents as a stressor or a roadblock in the relationship is a pattern that can be addressed.

6. **They can help you make a decision, though.** If deciding whether or not to breakup is the main issue, coming to a mutual decision can be the goal of your therapy. Espinoza describes it like this: “I won’t ever be the one to say, ‘Yes, you should stay together’ or, ‘No, you shouldn’t.’ Hopefully through therapy and reflection and vulnerability, the couple will arrive at a decision. So can I help them figure that out? Yes. Can I do that for them? Absolutely not.”
7. **Happy couples can (and should!) go to therapy.** You don’t need to wait until you’re about to break up. It’s certainly scary to ask your partner to go to therapy with you when things are basically status quo, since we tend to think of couples therapy as a last-ditch effort. However, “I would encourage even folks who are pretty satisfied in their relationships to seek out therapy,” Espinoza explains. “But I think what might be helpful is for them to come in with certain goals.” Those can be things like wanting to have a better sex life, or wanting to argue less, or to have more productive conversations about money—anything that’s causing friction or that is difficult to talk about is a good place to start. “Therapy provides space for folks to feel safe enough to express those things that they usually wouldn’t express otherwise,” says Espinoza.

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