INTERACTION CONSULTANTS

Marital Therapy Explained

Persons whose marriages are in distress may turn to marital therapy to improve the relationship.

Often the one seeking the therapy first, believes that the source of the distress is primarily, if not singularly the responsibility of the other person. While it may be true that the other person is contributing to distress, marital therapy seeks to inform the parties of both persons contribution to distress, so both might take responsibility for improvement.

A challenge at the beginning of martial therapy is getting the person who may seek to avoid the therapy, into therapy. This person may wish to avoid feeling blamed, deserved or not. Further, it is common for one or other party, but mostly men, to feel that they should be able to "fix" the situation without third party intervention. Hence making oneself available for marital therapy may take much time, coaxing or a serious intensification of the conflict to motivate for attendance. In any event, it is never the therapist's job to cajole, coax or trick a party into therapy. To do so undermines the integrity of the therapist and hence that party will likely never come to trust the therapist or the therapeutic process.

Note that whilst both persons may contribute to the issues underlying the integrity of the marriage, the behavior of one may actually be more egregious and hence serve to focus attention.

In the situation of an affair, drug and alcohol abuse as well as domestic violence, it is reasonable to focus on these matters and deal with them forthrightly. These issues cannot be condoned and safety considerations must take priority.

Once addressed however, and safety and primary health considerations are attended to, the focus shifts from overt or egregious behaviour to mutual contributions. The challenge is then in helping the person who initiated therapy to also self-reflect with the view of determining his or her own contribution to mutual distress. The issues to be addressed include; what are your respective contributions to distress and; how do you each affect the other such that neither is satisfied or a reasonable solution cannot be reached.

Marital therapy should offer both persons an insight into respective contributions so that they are better informed and hence in a better position to make decisions more attuned to sustaining and improving marital quality. Beyond that, marital therapy should equip persons with more effective strategies to resolve conflict and set priorities.

The challenge for the therapist is to withstand the intensity of the couple's emotions, provide a safe and secure environment and manage the delicate balance of supporting yet holding both persons accountable for affecting change.

Best advice? If one party in the marriage is requesting marital therapy, both should attend.

Marital therapy in the absence of one party is really individual therapy. Attending individual therapy for a marital issue increases the risk that any guidance offered would favour the person in attendance. This in turn can inadvertently undermine the integrity of the marriage. Bringing the other person into therapy after one has been seen is also not advisable as the person who comes second will be concerned that the therapist will be biased in favour of the person seen first. If it is the marriage you seek to address, then go together.

In view of issues of domestic violence, apprise the therapist before attending so that safety considerations can be taken into account.

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.