

## Marital Therapy?

Even in the face of rising divorce rates, no couple includes the vow, “And in 5 years we hope to divorce.” Marriage is seen as a commitment – for keeps. When distress abounds, couples are faced with a number of survival strategies. Depending on the issue, some couples will bind together to overcome adversity. Other couples may run in opposite direction, losing the benefit of mutual support and others will simply hunker down to ride out the storm. Interestingly, recent research suggests that of unhappy couples that do hunker down 2/3’s become happy couples after a period of about five years.<sup>1</sup>

For those that cannot hunker down or pull together, marital therapy is seen as strategy to get on track.

Marital therapy is more often provided by persons whose training is primarily in individual therapy as if to say all therapy is alike. Accordingly, 80 percent of all private practice therapists in the United States say they do marital therapy and only 12% of them are in a profession that requires even one course or any supervised experience.<sup>2</sup> This leaves consumers of marital therapy at a distinct disadvantage when looking for a therapist.

Very often the call for therapy comes from only one member of the marriage. The caller is often distressed and looking for help with the marriage. The caller may request to see the therapist alone first to deal with their intense feelings, or alternately they may conclude that their spouse will refuse to attend. A therapist trained in individual therapy will likely see the caller alone. A therapist trained in marital therapy will strongly recommend that the couple be seen together and will explain that beginning alone may increase the probability of a break-up and that the spouse would reasonably reject coming in later, concerned for a pre-established bias on the part of the therapist from having met first with the caller.

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<sup>1</sup> Linda J. Waite, Don Browning, William J. Doherty, Maggie Gallagher, Ye Luo, and Scott M. Stanley, Does Divorce Make People Happy? Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages, *Institute for American Values*. 2002.

<sup>2</sup> William J. Doherty, PhD How Therapy Can Be Hazardous To Your Marital Health, CMFCE Conference, JULY 3, 1999, [www.smartmarriages.com/hazardous.html](http://www.smartmarriages.com/hazardous.html)

Other callers may concern themselves for neutrality on the part of the therapist. Indeed many styles of individual therapy do call for neutrality and intervention is based upon passive reflecting of client issues. Trained marital therapists however, are rarely neutral. A trained marital therapist should be biased in favour of the integrity of your marriage lest they become the catalyst for its demise. Similarly, a trained marital therapist should have a stated opinion on matters of violence or abuse or infidelity and see these as serious issues to be addressed within the context of the marriage.

Marital therapy is one of the most intense venues for displaying emotion. A trained marital therapist should be comfortable with emotional intensity and be able to manage and structure the meeting to provide for the safety of the couple. Marital therapists can be highly directive or prescriptive. Couples entering marital therapy should expect the therapist to be active in the process and provide clear direction to improve the marital relationship.

If you are experiencing marital distress, don’t treat all therapists alike. Look for a marital therapist who has had specific training, is comfortable with emotional intensity and will offer clear direction to help resolve identified problems. Lastly, be sure the marital therapist will respect the integrity of your marriage and work towards resolving problems as opposed to falling prey to your conflict or questioning your commitment or desire to remain married.

If in the process you decide to end your marriage, it should be a matter of your decision, not the outcome of poor therapy. Poor therapy can hurt. Good therapy can help.

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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.