

## **2** WHAT IS COUPLE THERAPY?

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Couple therapy is a means of resolving problems and conflicts that couples have not been able to handle effectively on their own. It involves both partners sitting down with a trained professional to discuss their thoughts and feelings. (see Section 5, questions 1 & 2, for information on how to find a therapist.) The aim is to help them gain a better understanding of themselves and their partner, to decide if they need and want to make changes, and if so, to help them to do so.

### **ARE CHILDREN INVOLVED IN COUPLE THERAPY?**

No. Couple therapy involves only the couple. Children may be affected either directly or indirectly by problems in their parents' relationship, and to varying degrees, depending on factors such as their ages and the nature and severity of their parents' problems. They may, as a result, become anxious and begin to exhibit their own problems, although not all of their difficulties necessarily stem from those of their parents. The children's difficulties may improve as the couple's relationship improves or the couple may become more confident in their own ability to help the children.

Therapy that involves both the couple and their children is a different process called family therapy, which usually focuses on the relationships among family members rather than solely on the couple's relationship. During the course of this therapy, however, the focus may shift to the parental couple for a period of time. If this occurs, children would no longer be involved in treatment. If parents are wondering whether their children should be involved in the sessions, they should discuss this with the therapist.

## **WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COUPLE THERAPY AND SEX THERAPY?**

Couple therapy focuses on the total relationship while sex therapy deals more specifically with sexual dysfunction. Other problems within a relationship often affect the sexual relationship, and the quality of their sexual relationship is important to many couples, so this may be discussed in couple therapy. However, a couple may experience sexual problems in an otherwise sound relationship. If this is the case, sex therapy may be beneficial. This treatment recommendation would be based on the therapist's initial assessment of the problem.

## **WHAT KINDS OF PROBLEMS DO PEOPLE USUALLY BRING TO COUPLE THERAPY?**

People seek therapy for a range of problems and every couple is different. Some of the most common complaints include lack of communication, frequent or constant arguments, unfulfilled emotional needs, financial concerns and conflicts about children.

You may be wondering why these problems sound like common issues that many couples resolve without professional help. Couples often seek help not because their problems are different from those of other couples, but because they are unable to resolve them. Sometimes, this is because of a buildup of frustration and disappointment over time, sometimes because there is some other issue or meaning underlying the conflict. Other couples seek help as a result of a crisis in the relationship, such as an affair or apparent loss of affection and caring, or a traumatic event, such as an illness or loss in the family. (See the Appendix for examples of the kinds of situations for which couples seek help.)

## **WHAT WILL THE THERAPIST DO?**

The therapist is a professionally trained, objective third party who will listen to both partners as they express their thoughts and feelings and help them identify and clarify problem areas.

Most therapists start with an assessment. In an assessment, the therapist asks about the problems and how both people see them, the history of the relationship, and the individual histories of the partners. This enables the therapist to develop a deeper understanding. Most therapists will discuss their impression of the situation with the couple at the conclusion of the assessment. The couple then can decide whether to accept the therapist's recommendations about whether or not to enter therapy and what kind of therapy to pursue.

Once the couple enters therapy, the therapist's interpretation of issues may offer the couple a new perspective, which permits a change in feelings and behaviour. The therapist may act as a mediator, attempting to clear up misunderstandings in communication. This is often difficult for people to do themselves because they are emotionally caught up in the situation. The therapist may also help the partners consider alternative ways of handling problematic situations.