



Relationship Counseling with One Partner

Can counseling work when only one partner participates?

There are many reasons why a person might seek counseling for relationship problems without his or her partner's participation. For example:

- The relationship may be so negative that the absent partner doesn't think it can be repaired.
- The absent partner may be reluctant to share personal information with anyone outside the relationship.
- The partner seeking counseling may fear that the absent partner will interfere with a constructive counseling process.
- The absent partner may be prevented from participating because of scheduling or geographic obstacles.



Regardless of the reason why only one partner is present with the therapist, counseling can still be worthwhile. By exploring and expressing his or her feelings and learning new communication skills, one partner can have a very positive impact on the relationship.

How can one partner change a relationship for the better?

Any marriage counselor will tell you that one of the most common problems counselors see when couples come for help is poor communication skills. Many people get into trouble in their relationships because they have not developed their ability to listen and communicate. This can happen for several reasons:

- They don't know how to communicate properly.
- They don't take the time to think through what they want to say.
- They don't take the time to anticipate what the other partner might be thinking and feeling.
- They fear revealing too much of themselves.
- They fear their partner's anger.
- They don't want to hurt their partner's feelings.



How can partners be more empathic and understanding?

People marry or commit to relationships because they want to spend the rest of their lives together. They have every hope of growing together and creating a relationship that makes them feel emotionally healthy. Two factors that are necessary for this to happen are empathy and acceptance on the part of both partners.

Empathy is the capacity to put oneself in another's shoes and understand how they view their reality; how they feel about things. Demonstrating empathy and acceptance is critical to maintaining a strong relationship.



How can active listening create a positive climate in a relationship?

Active listening is a way of communicating that creates the important climate of empathy, acceptance, and understanding. It is a two-step response to a statement made by your partner. It includes reflecting back the emotion you detected in the statement, and the reason for the emotion. This is what active listening sounds like:

“Sounds like you’re upset about what happened at work.”

“You’re very annoyed by my lateness, aren’t you?”

“It makes you angry when you find errors on Joey’s homework.”

“I get the feeling you’re awfully busy right now.”



Why is active listening such a valuable relationship skill?

Active listening is a valuable relationship skill because it demonstrates that you understand what your partner is saying and how he or she feels about it.

Active listening means restating, in your own words, what the other person has said.

It’s a check on whether your understanding is correct.

It demonstrates that you are listening and that you are interested and concerned.

Active listening does not mean agreeing with the other person. The point is to demonstrate to your partner that you intend to hear and understand his or her point of view. This is good for the relationship for several reasons:

- When someone demonstrates that they want to understand what you are thinking and feeling, it feels good.
- It creates good feelings about the other person.
- Restating and checking understanding promotes better communication and fewer misunderstandings.

More relationship-building skills

Active listening is an effective skill for dealing with conflict. Other important relationship-building skills include asking open-ended questions, making summary statements to check understanding, and encouraging your partner to open up and elaborate by using neutral questions and phrases.

Open-ended questions begin with what, why, how do, or tell me.

- They get the other person to open up and elaborate on the topic. Asking these kinds of questions gets the other person involved by giving him or her a chance to tell what he or she thinks or knows.
- They are useful when the other person is silent or reluctant to elaborate.
- They are useful in dealing with negative emotions (such as anger or fear), since they help encourage the other person to vent feelings.

Summary statements sum up what you hear your partner saying.

- They enhance your partner’s self-esteem by showing that you were listening carefully.
- They help you focus on facts, not emotions.
- They help your partner clarify his or her own thinking by hearing your summary.
- They help you deal with multiple disagreements so you can deal with them one by one.
- They help you separate the important issues from the trivial.



Neutral questions and phrases get your partner to open up and elaborate on the topic you are discussing.

- They are more focused than open-ended questions.
- They help your partner understand what you are interested in hearing more about.
- They further communication because they help you gain more information.
- When you ask these kinds of questions, you demonstrate to your partner that you are interested and that you are listening.