Couples Counseling – A Safe Space

**By**

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The most common questions asked by people considering couples counseling are “Will the therapist take sides” and “Will what I say be used against me.” Steve Miner, MS, MFT-LPC a marriage and family therapist at Willow Sage Services Behavioral Health Clinic has addressed these questions with many couples.

The purpose of marriage counseling is to create a safe and respectful environment in which the couple can communicate and solve problems without hostility. The goal is to help each party to understand the needs and desires of the other. If one or both are unable to work together, individual psychotherapy may be appropriate to uncover the underlying causes.

Miner states the therapist must balance the needs of the two individuals, their relationship and sometimes their children. In particular, the handling of confidentiality within the couple raises unique ethical dilemmas. Is it possible for the same therapist to work with one or both individuals separately and together as a couple? When, if ever, is it ethical to break confidentiality with the couple? How much responsibility does the therapist have to protect the individual’s confidentiality within the couple dynamic?

When a husband and wife or couple is being seen in marriage/couple counseling, the counselor may occasionally arrange to see one or both individuals in individual sessions. Typically, these individual sessions are conducted under the rule that there will be no secrets, and that anything spoken in the individual sessions must be brought into the joint counseling. If either person has the sort of psychological problems that could warrant individual psychotherapy under strictly [confidential](http://www.guidetopsychology.com/confid.htm) conditions, the individual(s) should be referred to a separate psychotherapist, someone who has no connection to the marriage counseling.

Defining the Client

Some couple therapists define the couple’s relationship as the client at the beginning of therapy and only work to improve the relationship. While this approach may appear to provide a clear-cut answer to the ethical dilemmas of working with couples, each relationship consists of two individuals who each have their own needs, thoughts, and emotions that must be considered. It is important to explain clearly at the outset of therapy that the couple’s relationship and both individuals are clients in therapy, and that the counselor will seek to have a balanced relationship with each individual while all work together to improve the couple’s relationship.

Individual Sessions

Valuable information can be gathered regarding each individual’s history and commitment to the relationship and treatment. However, sometimes during these sessions, one individual will take the opportunity to divulge a secret to the therapist, which can create an ethically difficult situation. Some couple therapists choose not to hold individual sessions at all so that they do not have to confront this issue. Yet, this decision may limit the therapists’ ability to gather important information, and so many choose to conduct individual assessment sessions with each partner at the start of therapy.

Secrets

If a therapist does hold individual evaluation sessions with a couple or has outside contact with one partner, it should be determined at the beginning of therapy with all parties involved how to manage secrets or other information that have not been shared within the couple. What does the therapist do if one partner discloses information and asks the therapist not to tell the other?

Some therapists believe that seeing a couple together gives them a better picture of their interactions and relationships. On the other hand, separate individual sessions may provide even more information. No matter what format a therapist uses, the major goal of couple therapy is to facilitate relationships for a couple by improving communication, emotional attachment, etc. However, the problem occurs when “secrets” are revealed in separate sessions.

From the client’s perspective, secrets are often best kept unknown to the other partner. From the therapist’s perspective, secrets may have profound clinical implications. They may actually be the among key factors interfering with the couple’s relationship and triangulating the therapist.

Steve Miner, MS-MFT, LPC, is a marriage and family therapist (MFT), treating a range of relationship issues including: couples and marital problems, family problems, depression, anxiety, grief, individual psychological problems, and child-parent problems. He practices therapy with brief, solution-focused goals. If your family is experiencing the kinds of problems described here, schedule an appointment with Steve by calling (208) 233-1276. He will be happy to help you figure out a plan.