

# Making Couple's Counseling Work

by Dr. Butch Losey

*Imagine a couple out to dinner. Early on they get into an argument that escalates to harsh words resulting in someone threatening divorce. At this point they decide to end dinner early and go home. The escalation continues in the car until both abruptly stop yelling but also stop talking to each other. For days they continue this disengagement.*



## A Safe Place

When couple's argue this way in the counseling session and it escalates the counselor has a choice; let it happen or interrupt it. From my perspective, the counselor needs to interrupt this. Counseling should be a safe place where couples work to interact in a way to demonstrate the best version of themselves in the moment. Problematic interaction should be identified, interrupted and replaced with healthy ones.

## The Counselor as Director

Couples counseling is one of the most difficult types of counseling for the counselor. There are volatile, high intensity emotions, hidden agendas and unresolved conflict. Counselors can become overwhelmed and feel ineffective. In individual counseling, the counselor can stall for time, throw out a little empathy responding and ask "What do you think about that? In couple's counseling, you do not have that kind of time in the presence of such emotional intensity. For effective couple's counseling, the counselor needs to be an active participant in the process, exerting necessary controls when needed and providing ongoing structure to the session. Ten seconds of interrupting and discounting in a couple's session and the couple could be out of control. A passive counselor can actually make things worse.

## Balance

Some couple's counseling leaves one wondering who the client is anyway. Is it one of

the spouses, either spouse or the relationship? The risk for any couple's counselor is the possibility that the counselor will win the alliance of one of the spouses.

There are few things worse than having the perception that the marriage counselor is taking your partner's side. More so, repeated sessions of this feeling may make you feel ganged up on. For this reason, it is very important that the counselor maintain balance in the session. I prefer to practice a "neutral, multi-perspective" approach. I work to be neutral, which means I am open to the possibilities of your perspective, your partner's perspective, and any variation that may become apparent. I am also multi-perspective, meaning that I also do not fall in love with my own ideas! As a counselor, I know I am doing my job well if at the end of the session the couple is unable to tell whose side I am on!

## We need Communication Skills!

Many couples come to counseling believing that they need communication skills. I understand why they think this. At some point it can feel like the couple cannot talk about anything substantive without frustration and fighting. However, most couples in my practice actually have good communication skills. I find that what is more likely happening is that the couple is gridlocked on difficult issues and are less willing to consider their partner's perspective. So offering a communication strategy that has a central focus of perspective-taking is productive to use in the counseling



session. For this reason, I prefer not to teach couples “communication skills” that they already possess but give them a strategy that helps them to take their partner’s perspective while incorporating their own.

## Finding the Right Counselor

Sorting through “find a therapist” websites like Psychology Today or Good Therapy.org for a couple’s counselor is a fuzzy task. How do you know that the counselor knows what they are doing or if they have had success with couples? If you have searched these sites, you will note that many counselors say that they work with couples, most however have little or no training beyond one course of family counseling in grad school (this course has a short section on marriage). Looking closer, it is clear that many counselors list every possible client type and disorder to capture as many clients that they can. Really, can counselors have expertise in everything? These counselors are probably best to be avoided. Finding the right couple’s counselor is finding one that specializes in the practice and has post-graduate training in couple’s therapy.

## Is Couples Counseling Effective?

Measuring outcomes in clinical practice is a rare occurrence. In community mental health settings, outcomes are measured for funding sources but have little direct impact on the counseling session. If you were to call and ask clinicians to show evidence of their outcomes of treatment, very few if any would be able to do so. So how do you show effectiveness without using outcome measures? You don’t.

I utilize a variety of tools that serve as both an outcome measure and a clinical intervention. Couples use these to assess their relationship and also to measure their progress towards

treatment goals. Outcome measures are also used to measure reductions in depression and anxiety or increases in different types of intimacy and marital satisfaction.

Couple’s counseling can be emotionally challenging, highly intimate and yes, successful. In the end, that final session where we review outcome measures is a strong concrete affirmation that the time, money and effort that you have invested made a difference in your relationship and your personal wellbeing.

*Dr. Butch Losey is a couple counselor in Cincinnati Ohio. He is owner of Waybridge Counseling Services that currently employs 15 counselors in a private practice setting and a school-based mental health program.*

*Dr. Losey is professor for Xavier University’s graduate counseling program and past President and Executive Director of the Greater Cincinnati Counseling Association. He has been a clinical training director for a large mental health agency, a member of a county wide crisis response team and has worked on a suicide hotline. He has worked in a wide variety of clinical settings.*

*He is also an international speaker on bullying prevention and other mental health topics. He is the author of Bullying, Suicide and Homicide: Understanding, Assessing, and Preventing Threats to Self and Others for Victims of Bullying (Routledge, 2011) and Creating an Effective Couple Therapy Practice (Routledge 2017).*

---