

Couples therapy can save a marriage – or end it

By Sarri Gilman

A friend recently asked me, "Why do so many couples who go to couples counseling get divorced? Aren't they going in to fix their marriage? Why do they come out divorcing?"

I could tell this was the sort of question she had been thinking about for years and it was the kind of question that made her nervous to ask about.

My first question was, "Are you thinking about going to couples counseling?"

No, she said she would never risk her marriage on it.

This had me laughing.

Since I work with couples as a therapist, I do see a number of people choose to divorce, and use therapy to help them through this very painful decision.

Often what people tell their friends about therapy and what really happens in the therapy room are a bit different. First of all, what people share in therapy is private. They come to this experience to talk about things that are very private.

The truth about couples therapy is that many people come in to talk about separating. There are really two kinds of couples that go to couples therapy: Couples who really want to make their marriage better and couples who want to evaluate if this is something they want to end.

For couples who come in to work on improving their marriage, the words "split up" or "divorce" never ever comes up in the room.

Couples therapy is a great way for people to learn new tools, break habits that don't work, learn how to really hear what they each need, be supportive and learn how to make their marriage great.

It's very helpful when a couple is facing a big transition and their old ways of doing things isn't working or feeling right or they are struggling with so much they are losing their connection to each other.

Couples therapy also is a place where couples come in and talk about ending their relationship.

The truth is that usually the therapist will hear this long before their friends will hear it. This results in friends thinking the couple went to therapy to "work on the marriage" when in fact they didn't really want to tell their friends how fragile and exhausted the couple or marriage was.

Friends are often shocked to hear that a couple is parting.

After 26 years of doing couples work, I have a little test I use to know how much trouble the couple is in. This is not a scientific studied test. It is a test that I made up and it helps me figure out how to help a couple in my office.

My test is this: If the couple is living "as if they are divorced," this is a situation that will be examining ending the relationship. When couples live like they are divorced and have done everything but sign the papers and this has gone on for a long time, it is very hard to find the will on both parties to change the circumstance.

They can decide in therapy that they want to save their relationship and really change the divorced behavior. But they will have to work hard in therapy and at home to achieve this outcome.

When a couple is not living like they are divorced, these couples usually steer themselves toward skills and overall improving their marriage.

Does marriage group therapy help marriages? Yes, yes, yes.

I have heard great things from couples who have picked up skills and improved their communication through groups offered in their communities.

Does reading books about couples/marriage help? Kind of.

It helps more if both people read the material together and discuss each page together as they read.

It's not as helpful as having a therapist in the room notice when something is getting overlooked. Couples can have trouble hearing each other and a therapist can be a third set of ears listening and helping the couple navigate over difficult spots.

Often, if couples go to counseling sooner rather than later as they feel their relationship coming apart, their chances of repairing it are much better.

A couple can be together a long time and not feel the marriage coming apart seam by seam.

Couples therapists are there to support couples with what they want to do with their relationship. Sometimes one person wants to stay and sometimes one person is finished.

A couples therapist will always work to see what can be saved of the relationship. Sometimes what can be saved is the marriage, sometimes it is not.

Some couples come in with a relationship that is very strong and healthy, they are coming to learn skills to keep it that way.

If you are looking for a counselor to do couples work, ask if the therapist specializes in couples. Ask if he or she is a licensed marriage and family therapist. Family therapists have specialized training to work with couples.

Ask how many years the person has been doing couples work. I recommend that couples see therapists with 15 years or more of couples work, as the more experience the better.