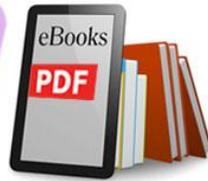




## STRAIGHT talk WITH GHITA



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### How to Prepare for Couples Counselling

Problems occur in partnerships when reality departs sharply from our expectations, hopes, desires, and concerns. It's human nature to try and change one's partner instead of adjusting our expectations. This aspect of human nature is what keeps counsellors in business.

#### Common Reasons for Counselling:

- Communication problems
- Sexual difficulties
- Conflicts about child rearing or blended families
- Substance abuse
- Anger
- Infidelity
- Stonewalling conflict resolution
- Family violence
- Disappointment in gender/ parental roles
- Sadness in losing long-held personal dreams

### How to Maximise the Value from Your Couples Therapy Sessions

In order to get the most from your couples counselling sessions, it is helpful to be aware of unproductive patterns, so that you know what to avoid when you go to your therapy sessions. A common, yet unproductive pattern in couples counselling, is focusing on the problem that you have at the moment. This is a reactive (and mostly ineffective) approach to resolving issues.

#### The Unhelpful Things Couples do:

- Blaming or attempting to dominate another
- Disengaging/ Withdrawing
- Resentful compliance
- Whining/ Passive aggression
- Denial, Stonewalling or Avoiding

#### Positional Stances

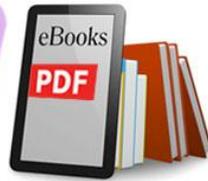
The hardest part of couples counselling is accepting that you need to improve your response to a problem (how you think about it, feel about it, or what you need to do about it). Very few people want to focus on improving their response. It's more common to build a strong case for why the other person should do the improving. This is not a good attitude to have when going to couples counselling because it is like being in a court. If you want to create a win-win solution, you cannot hold a position that has caused your partner to lose in the past.

#### Learning About Yourself and Your Reactions

How to tell if you are not focusing on your own behaviour: In the session, you will be talking more about what your



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partner is doing, or not doing, and building a case as to why they should change. There is only one antidote - re-focus back on yourself! What this means is, you get to understand what annoys you, what pushes your buttons, and how to handle things.

### **To Create Sustained Improvement in Your Relationship, You Will Need:**

- A vision of the life you want to build together and individually
- The appropriate attitudes and skills to work as a team
- The motivation to persist

### **Trade-offs, Tough Choices and Time**

To create the relationship you really desire, there will be some difficult trade-offs and tough choices for both of you. The first trade-off will be time. It simply takes time to create a relationship that flourishes: time to be together, time to be with family, time to play, coordinate, nurture, relax, hang out, and plan. This time will encroach on some other activity.

The second compromise is comfort: That means emotional comfort, like going out on a limb to try novel ways of things, listening (active listening) and being curious instead of butting in, speaking up instead of becoming resentfully compliant or withdrawing. In the beginning, there will be emotional risks in taking action, but you will never explore different worlds if you always keep sight of the shoreline. In addition, few people are emotionally comfortable being confronted with how they don't live their values or being confronted with the consequences of their actions.

The other comfort that will be challenged is energy comfort. It simply takes effort to sustain improvement over time, staying conscious of making a difference over time, remembering to be more respectful, more giving, more appreciative, etc. It takes effort to remember and act.

### **Lobbing Grenades**

Don't pull the pin on your relationship just because you fight!

Sessions might pass in silence as you and your partner remain angry over perceived wrongs, or you might yell or argue during sessions. Both are okay. Your counsellor can act as a mediator and help you cope with the resulting emotions.

In couples counselling there is a fair bit of direction from a counsellor. This is because people can get caught up in a blame story, or are in therapy to demonstrate some sort of justice. When clients are defensive, or hypersensitive to criticism, a session can end up being wasted on just placating one party who is sulking.

In all these areas, there is generally a conflict between short-term gratification and the long-term goal of creating a satisfying relationship. The blunt reality is that, in an interdependent relationship, some effort is required on the part of each person to make a sustained improvement. It is like pairs figure skating – one person cannot do most of the work and still create an exceptional team.



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### **Successful Couples Counsellors Have to be Blunt**

Counsellors such as myself, try to be as neutral as much as possible, however sometimes it is their job to challenge people with story inconsistencies, contrary body language and to do a type of reality checking. Moreover, this can be hard for some people to accept if they are not in touch with their emotions, or they they have a habit blame others to avoid conflict. While counsellors try to appear unbiased and sensitive to both parties, in order to do their jobs properly and to keep therapy on track, they do have to call clients out on their junk and tell clients when their behaviour is counter-productive, alienating or abusive.

To get the most out of your money in session, our job is not to be your friend, but to show you the best methods for getting your relationship back on track, and sometimes this means asking you to take responsibility for past events so that you can move forward and focus on the future.

### **No Magic Wand at the 11th Hour**

Things to consider: Counsellors can't be expected to 'fix' a relationship, which has taken decades to degrade and is now beyond repair. We can't make one person cooperate if they don't want to. If one party is about to walk out, or has already walked out of a relationship, there may be little that we can do if all trust has been lost.

### **You Can't Fix a Marriage in One Session**

Couples should be aware that because there are two people telling their side of a story, it is unlikely that one session will sort out a couples' issues. Please expect to invest in your healing for anywhere from 4 -12 sessions.

### **Flawed Assumptions**

There is a definite possibility that you have flawed assumptions about your partner's motives and that he/ she may also have flawed assumptions about yours. The problem is, most of the time, we refuse to believe that those assumptions are flawed.

### **Focus on Changing Yourself Rather than Your Partner**

You can learn a lot about yourself by understanding what annoys you and how you handle it. Couples Therapy works best if you have more goals for yourself than for your partner. I am at my best when I help you to reach the objectives you set for yourself.

### **When the Honeymoon is Over**

It's easy to be considerate and loving to your partner when the vistas are magnificent, the sun is shining, and breeze is gentle. But when it gets bone-chilling cold, you're hungry and tired, and your partner is whining and sniveling about how you got them into this mess, that's when you get tested.