

**WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW
ABOUT MARITAL AND
FAMILY THERAPY**

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This morning, Mary and John are barely speaking to each other. The echoes of last night's bitter argument still hang in the air between them. As John leaves for work the couple suddenly turn toward each other, each wanting to patch up the quarrel. But they don't know how to, and the moment passes, the opportunity is lost. Each thinks: "Why do we always fight like this? Why can't we get along better? There must be a way."

For many people, the way lies through marriage counseling. Every husband and wife wants to have a happy marriage. Those whose marriages are troubled--like John and Mary--are for the most part still loving couples who want their relationship to improve and to endure. And those whose relationship is basically a good one still have their occasional differences; or they seek for ways to make their marriage even better than it is.

The fact is that almost every marriage can benefit, in one way or another or at one time or another, from professional counseling.

Marriage has always been a difficult task. Today, with the rapid-fire pace of social change -- greater personal freedom, easier divorce, the women's movement, higher expectations -- it is even more difficult. Most of us want more out of our marriages than we ever did before, and this often leads to conflict. Most of us expect greater emotional fulfillment out of our marriages, and this sometimes leads to disappointment. At the same time, however, social scientists have learned a great deal about what makes people think and act in certain ways -- as individuals, as couples and in families. And they have also learned how to help people make changes in the way they behave. Thus, the growing need for help in dealing with marital and family tensions is being met by expert counselor/therapists who are specially trained to provide it.

But most men and women do not have a clear idea of what marriage and family counseling is, or how it works. Some even think -- mistakenly -- that to seek outside help for their problems is a sign of weakness or failure.

That is why we have prepared this brochure. It is designed to help you better understand the methods and goals of marital and family therapy, and the ways in which it can help families, couples and individuals to relieve stresses, resolve conflicts and achieve a more rewarding marriage and family life.

What does a Marriage and Family Therapist actually do?

Most people think that he or she will tell them what to do about their problems. A competent therapist, however does not offer ready-made solutions, nor prescribe remedies, nor even give advice. Most important, a marriage and family therapist never

"takes sides" with one spouse of the other; nor does he or she ever act as a "judge" deciding which partner is "right" or "wrong." There is almost never a right or wrong side in marital conflict -- only different sides!

Instead, a therapist tries to help both partners come to grips with their difficulties so that they can -- with the therapist's guidance -- work out reasonable solutions for themselves. As one veteran marriage and family therapist explains: "The only solution that will be of any use to a couple must arise out of their own thoughts, feelings and actions."

A marital therapist has many ways to help a couple achieve this goal. For example, he or she:

- encourages the couple to look at their marriage realistically and objectively.
- acts as a neutral "sounding-board" for their complaints and dissatisfactions.
- helps a couple to identify the real problems in their relationship. In most cases, what couples report as their problem (such as constant arguing over sex or money) is usually only a symptom of their basic underlying conflict.
- helps both husband and wife realize exactly how each of them contributes to this conflict, and to understand that neither of them is solely or chiefly to blame for it.
- acts as a "mirror" to the marriage so that the couple can learn to see it -- and themselves -- from new perspectives.
- offers suggestions to help a couple deal with day-to-day tensions while the counseling process is going on.

When couples understand that a marriage and family therapist is not a wizard who has a magic formula for transforming imperfect marriages into perfect ones, they are likely to put more effort of their own into making their marriage better.

How does Marriage and Family Therapy actually work?

In most cases therapy begins with an interview during which husband and wife outline their problems and say why they are seeking help. At this session the therapist usually sets aside some time to gather information on each partner's personal and family background, and on the marriage. The more such facts a therapist knows, the better he or she is able to understand a couple's current situation and relationship.

In succeeding sessions the therapist and the couple explore specific issues and problems in the marriage. The main goal always is to seek out fundamental causes of tensions between the partners, and to help them find constructive and positive ways to deal with them.

Here is how one typical therapist explained her approach to counseling troubled marriages: "First, I try to calm a couple's emotions so that we can begin in a reasonable way to find out how and why the conflicts occur. Next, I try to deal with the emotional stresses of each spouse, and with the way these affect the marriage."

A marriage and family therapist therefore operates on many levels, sometimes all of them at once. But the focus is on the marital relationship.

Most marriage and family therapists see husband and wife together. This method (sometimes called conjoint therapy) has several advantages. For one thing, spouses who are extremely angry or fearful can vent their feelings in the "protective" atmosphere of the therapist's office. Second, neither husband nor wife has to worry that one partner may be telling lies or secrets about the other. Third, the counselor can see exactly how the couple deal with and react to each other. He or she can correct misunderstandings immediately. And when a couple starts to make progress toward resolving their problems, the therapist can point this out to them as it happens.

Of course every marriage and family therapist has his or her own method of working. Sometimes this means separately with husband or wife between the joint sessions. Some therapists prefer to work in teams (often one man and one woman) to get the benefit of both male and female viewpoints. Some therapists offer group counseling, in which several couples meet together to share their problems and solutions. Special techniques are sometimes used to deal with marital conflict, such as giving a couple exercises in better ways of communicating, or setting small but significant goals aimed at improving a couple's ways of behaving toward each other.

Three important things for you to remember are:

1. Everything that is said or done in a session with a marriage and family therapist will be kept completely and permanently confidential.
2. You are entitled to know in advance how your therapist prefers to work.
3. If you do not have confidence in the marriage and family therapist you have chosen, or do not feel an emotional rapport with him or her, you may discontinue sessions with that person at any time.

How Do I Know When I Need Marriage Counseling?

There is no simple answer. The timing differs for different people, but as a general rule marital problems should be dealt with as early as possible. When couples wait too long to get help it is likely that their conflicts will escalate, and their attitudes become more rigid and hostile. At that point it is much more difficult for counseling or therapy to be effective.

"Couples must be alert to prevent their marriages from sinking deeper and deeper into trouble," one therapist says. "Too often husbands and wives think of counseling or therapy only as a last-ditch remedy. By that time it may be almost too late to help. Counseling or therapy obtained in time can head off problems before they get out of hand, or reach a crisis point."

There are certain key times in a marriage when prompt counseling or therapy is vital. For example:

- When a couple does not know why they are in conflict, or does not know how to

change their ways of behaving toward each other.

-When a marital problem is deeply rooted in the personality pattern of one spouse or the other-- such as severe depression, chronic drinking, acute anxieties, deep feelings of insecurity or inadequacy.

-When communication between a couple becomes almost exclusively hostile.

-When a couple cannot reach out to each other with love and understanding without the support of a third party. Typically, this occurs when one partner cannot forgive a past hurt, or fears to be trusting, or is afraid of commitment.

-When a marriage has deteriorated to the point where a spouse feels he or she must make a dramatic gesture, such as leaving home.

The important point about when to seek counseling or therapy is that it is never too late to make constructive changes in a marriage so long as a couple still feel some love for each other, and still want to make their relationship work.

"I've Always Handled My Own Problems -- Why Go to a Counselor/Therapist?"

Self-reliance is a traditional American virtue. But it is extremely hard for a person to be "part of the solution" when he or she is also "part of the problem." Neither spouse can be truly objective about the difficulties in the marriage.

The idea that no special knowledge or skill is needed to build a happy marriage is widespread. Thus, when couples feel the need for help they are often reluctant to admit it. But seeking professional assistance -- much like going to a doctor when one is ill -- is not an admission of failure or incompetence. On the contrary, it is saying, "We recognize there is a problem in our marriage that we want to resolve, but we realize that we need professional help to do that."

What If One Partner Doesn't Want to See the Marriage and Family Therapist?

It can make matters more difficult, but not hopeless. Often the reluctant partner will cooperate when he or she realizes the other is going through with the therapy regardless. Sometimes the therapist can convince the reluctant partner to join in the process. When therapy begins to produce positive changes in one spouse, the other often decides to take part in the sessions in order to find out what is happening. And even if the reluctant spouse never becomes part of the therapy process, the support and guidance the other spouse receives is often sufficient in itself to help the marriage grow.

How Long Does Marriage Therapy Take?

Anywhere from a few weeks to a year or longer; there is no way to tell in advance. It depends on how deep-rooted the problems are, how willing a couple works on them, and

what goals a couple wants to achieve through therapy. Because most marriage and family therapists concentrate on what is happening in the marriage now (instead of emphasizing childhood backgrounds of unconscious attitudes), there is a trend toward short-term treatment. Some therapists offer trial periods. Others make a "time contract" with a couple, setting a specific number of sessions as a deadline for moving toward a mutually agreed-on goal.

How Effective is Marriage and Family Therapy?

Whether it will solve one's marital difficulties depends on several factors: 1) how soon one seeks help; 2) whether both spouses are willing to cooperate for the necessary length of time; 3) how determined a couple is to make their marriage work.

Experts estimate that about two-thirds of all couples are helped by marriage and family therapy, about 25 percent show little or no change, and the remaining 8 percent report their marriage worsened. However, it is important to remember that there is no single true way of measuring effectiveness, or "success." If a couple who once fought fiercely leaves therapy arm in arm -- and yet starts battling about the same things a year later, is that "success"? A couple trapped in a desperately unhappy and irretrievable marriage may be helped by therapy to see divorce -- and a new start in life -- as the most sensible solution to their situation. Is that "success"? Ultimately, the answer rests with each partner's attitude toward the marriage, and toward his or her own life goals.

A Final Word

The therapy staff are Christian counselors serving the West Portland community. They do more than deal with troubled families. Sometimes the focus is on marital issues; other times it might be on parenting and/or children. They provides pre-marital and re-marital counseling, which helps couples prepare for the realities of married life and discover their strengths as a couple. **It is difficult to work on marriage therapy if only one spouse comes for an appointment; therefore, it is absolutely necessary that both work on the marriage together and come to all appointments.** They may schedule appointments for some individual work when it is necessary.

Indeed, it is fair to say that the staff at Family Institute are concerned with individual and couple growth at all levels. Their focus is on the whole person; therefore, they are concerned about your spiritual issues too. Their basic goal is to help men and women learn constructive ways of relating to one another in order to achieve happier marriages, and happier lives.

How To Make An Appointment:

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