

Save Your Marriage!

Generally speaking we choose to go into therapy when we can't figure out how to make our lives work by ourselves. Maybe we've been aware of underlying sadness that doesn't seem to go away no matter what we do. Or perhaps we have started having panic attacks for no noticeable reason that we cannot contain on our own. We could be tearful much of the time and don't understand what is causing it. On the other hand, we could enter therapy because we are unhappy with our marriage and we can't get ourselves to leave or figure out how to change it.

When we go into therapy for any reason, and we are married, the odds of ending up divorced actually increase. I suspect this is because when we enter therapy we are looking at things solely from our own perspective. We go into therapy hoping to get a different perspective, but often what happens is that we get support in our perspective. Most therapists are kind, care giving types of people who have gone into the profession in hopes of helping people. So when you enter their office they give you support and encouragement, they help you feel better about yourself and your position. If you have a partner and you are unhappy with them, the therapist encourages you to stand up for yourself and assert your needs.

The downside of their doing this is that while it may make you feel better in the short run, it runs the risk of destroying your marriage in the long run. This is because what has happened is that you have gotten help in making you stronger, at the cost of the connection between you and your partner.

In supervision early in my career I remember my supervisor saying that once a person brings their spouse into therapy you become the marriage's counselor and not the individual's counselor. This made sense to me at the time.

Since then I have come to realize that when someone comes to me their relationships are as much a part of the therapy as they. This means that I do not take positions against the other parties. I support the person in discovering more about themselves and exploring how their current relationships are impacted by their past experiences. I do not make judgments about my client needing to end their relationships just because my client is unhappy in the situation.

One of my past supervisors habitually demanded that her clients cut off connections with their families. Now, at the time this made sense to me since some of those family connections were with parents that continued to be abusive. And, sometimes, this it can be important to take time-outs in these situations until the clients are strong enough to protect themselves. But most of the time what my clients need is to be able to develop a different kind of relationship with these important people in their lives by developing compassion for both themselves, and for their parents.

To do this the therapist has to themselves be coming from a place of recognizing that there are no "bad guys"; only people who are "doing the best they can" given their circumstances. We do a great injustice to our clients and to the families of our clients when we take the position of naming someone as the "bad guy" and someone else as the "victim." Yet often this is exactly what takes place in therapy.

How can we stay married to someone who we think of as our enemy, as “the bad guy”? The difficult thing is figuring out that this is happening. When we are in therapy and we are being supported in our position and our partner is behaving badly, it is easy to think that we are indeed “the victim”. Maybe we even are actually “the victim” of their bad behavior. But to remain there without making the effort to embrace the humanity of the other person is doing them and ourselves a terrible disservice.

If you are in therapy and have found yourself thinking of divorce, please pay attention. Are you finding yourself thinking a lot about how your partner is treating you badly and that you “don’t deserve it”? Are you keeping your thoughts and feelings to yourself, or just sharing them with your therapist or your friends and not your partner? Has the trust between you and your partner disintegrated since entering therapy?

Have you brought your partner into therapy only to have them storm out? This tends to happen when our therapist has taken on the position of “the rescuer” and is now ganging up with you on your partner. The result then is that your partner feels defensive and angry in the therapy session because they know that you have been talking about them and are unhappy with them.

Often this happens to husbands. Then men get the bad rap of not wanting to participate in therapy. Who would want to go into a situation in which they know that they are going to be criticized? That’s what these brave guys do when they attend even one session. When they get overwhelmed and storm out then we label them as uncooperative.

The bottom line is this: when you go into therapy, take your partner. It will bring you closer together if from the beginning you work on your issues with them present. It will allow your partner to learn how to respond to your emotional needs by watching the therapist. It will allow you both to discover things about yourselves that you did not know. It will bring you closer, and it may also save your marriage.