

## Seeking Counselling For Marital Issues

If your relationship isn't working, one or other partner may suggest counselling. The counselling of choice is couple or marital counselling.

However, some persons hold the view that they want to be seen first, so as to inform the counsellor of the issues at hand. In other circumstances, a partner may not wish to attend. That partner may believe all the issues originates with the other person and hence believes that person should get help for him or herself first. When a person believes they or the other should be seen first, they also hold the opinion that the other person can be invited into the counselling sometime down the road.

Typically a person seen on an individual basis for a couple or marital issue will inform the counsellor how the matters at hand originate with the behaviour of the other person. If the one in counselling admits to any issues, it is more often presented that he or she is the victim of the other's behaviour and they may not be handling their upset well. Thus and over the course of a few counselling sessions, the counsellor can be influenced by this client inadvertently, then aligned with the client and thus hold a view that posits culpability for the issues at hand to the other person.

Invariably when the other person enters counseling, they then feel in a one-down position given the pre-existing relationship between their partner and the counsellor and they will likely also feel their alignment. In view of these dynamics, attending or starting with individual therapy for a couple problem can create it's own set of problems and undermine the intended benefit of counselling.

There is one important exception to couple counselling. In the presence of dangerous behaviour, where a person may not be at liberty to fully disclose issues, couple counselling can

actually increase the risk of harm to that person. Hence it is important for the counselor to speak with clients separately first, often by phone, to screen for matters concerning domestic violence and power imbalances. Accepting referrals prior to such screening may also not only undermine the intention of counselling, but may put people at risk of harm.

So as a general rule, if you are having couple or marital difficulties and you are seeking to address those difficulties through counselling, both partner should attend assuming it is safe for both to be forthright in the counselling process.

Seeing a counselor on an individual basis may only exacerbate your problems if the counselor becomes aligned with the person seen first or even if the person seen second suspects an alignment.

Your intended counsellor or agency should ask questions at the time of referral to help determine or at least screen for safety issues owing to concerns of abuse. In view of abuse issues, several options remain. You may be asked to have a safety plan in place and/or you may be asked to arrive separately. It may be appropriate to withhold couple counselling until abuse issues are addressed first. The counsellor at the time of referral should be able to direct you and devise a plan in view of abuse issues.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW  
(905) 628-4847  
gary@yoursocialworker.com  
<http://www.yoursocialworker.com>

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.