

# "Common Concepts in Counseling with Couples"

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(rev Sep 2020)

*Since these concepts are pretty common with all couples it may be helpful to read and then rate yourself on how well you are doing with each of these issues using a scale of 0 (needs a lot of work) - 10 (got it), then choose one area to work on improving.*

- #1 -- Focus on Fixing Yourself/You Can Only Change Yourself
- #2 -- Let Your Spouse Think/Be Different than You
- #3 -- Let Your Spouse Use Their Agency Differently
- #4 -- Let Your Spouse Have a Clean Slate
- #5 -- Look for the Third Option/Think Outside the Box
- #6 -- Recognize Whose Issue Is Whose
- #7 -- You Were Attracted to Each Other for a Reason
- #8 -- You Can't Fully Choose *In* If You Can't Choose *Out*
- #9 -- Your Thoughts Get Communicated as Nonverbal Messages
- #10 -- Develop the Ability to Think Like Your Spouse
- #11 -- It Takes Time to Reap the Benefits of Your Changes
- #12 -- Grieving and Surrender are Necessary in Marriage

Couples struggle with some common concepts when they come to me for counseling. I invariably end up discussing these ideas with clients within the first few sessions of counseling. Because they are so common, I share these concepts here to give couples a head start on helping their marriage become all that they want it to be. You might also think of it as a free counseling session or two. I encourage you to save yourself some time and money by shifting your thinking in the following ways:

## #1 -- Focus on Fixing Yourself

If only I had a dollar for every person that walks into my office hoping I will "fix" their spouse. It's human nature, it seems, to want the other person to do the changing instead of having to change ourselves. Couples need to learn to focus on your own stuff rather than getting caught up in each other's issues.

The only person you can directly change is yourself. If couples can keep their focus on the things they are individually doing, saying or thinking, and then will spend their time and energy working to change those things, couples will be much more effective in their efforts to improve their marriage and their lives.

Focusing on yourself and the things you actually have some control over also helps you to be less frustrated with your relationship and your life. It's much more empowering to focus on you, since you have a lot more control over yourself than you do over others. Most of us can stay pretty well occupied with overcoming our own weaknesses and imperfections.

## #2-- Let Your Spouse Think/Be Different than You

It's a learned skill for people to realize and regularly remember that their spouse thinks, feels, and responds to things differently than they do, and that it's okay that they do so. We all think the way we think and default to thinking that our spouse should think the way we do too. So, when our spouse sees things differently than we do it can come as a bit of a shock to the system and can cause some problems.

Every person has their own perception of reality, so the better couples get at allowing their spouse to be and think differently, and to not negatively judge each other's opinions and perspectives, the better they can work together on their relationship difficulties. Different is not wrong or less-than. It's just different.

## #3 -- Let Your Spouse Use Their Agency Differently

Your spouse making choices that differ from you is not wrong or less-than. Many couples seem to think it's a personal affront to their opinions and beliefs if the spouse thinks differently, as if it means something is wrong with them. It doesn't have to be defined that way.

Being okay with your spouse when they have differing opinions and make different choices, without making it "less-than" leads to allowing them to have their own agency, and to use it differently than you.

## #4 -- Let Your Spouse Have a Clean Slate

It's really hard to not judge your spouse by their past actions. It seems to be the default in relationships to assume they will behave the same way "next time" that they have in the past. The problem is that there is no room for a spouse to change in that environment. Both spouses need to have in their mind that "this time" will be better, because if they don't then even when a spouse tries to be better they can't break through the mental box the other has put them in.

When you have an assumption that your spouse will freak out every time you bring up money then it affects the way you approach them, which increases the chances that they actually will freak out again, creating a negative self-sustaining cycle in the relationship.

To allow your spouse to have a clean slate takes generosity of spirit and is an act of faith, especially when you may have plenty of "evidence" to back up your negative expectations and assumptions of them. You are choosing to have faith – even when you have past evidence to the contrary.

## #5 -- Look for the Third Option

Most couples come to me with two limited options in mind for resolving their relationship issues--neither of which are optimal for either spouse. There is usually a better third option, but it usually requires one or the other to stretch in ways that may not be convenient or comfortable. The process and potential pain of personal growth make it difficult for couples to willingly seek out or embrace such options on their own.

A particular couple came to see me with their relationship struggles. The husband could only see two limited ways to respond to his wife. He identified the first option of saying nothing when she shared something, and shutting down, or speaking up and causing a fight making the situation worse.

Obviously neither one was a good win-win option for improving the quality and connection in their relationship. So, we discussed some additional options. One "third option" was for him to not shut down, but to communicate with her in a *different* way than he normally did, so that she could receive his comments more openly.

The ability of couples to think outside the box and come up with alternatives to the two usually obvious, but limited choices can help them be their own therapist.

## #6 -- Recognize Whose Issue Is Whose

I regularly find myself reminding clients that a particular issue is "not their crap" but their spouse's, or it's their crap and NOT their spouse's! Couples need to learn how to identify when to take responsibility for something, and when it isn't their issue. This is difficult for many couples to see sometimes, since unhealthy codependency often exists to some degree in relationships, and projection of our stuff onto the other is common as well.

One example of figuring out whose stuff is whose is a couple where the husband is always "offering suggestions" of how his wife could do things better. He's an engineer (and a man), so it he might naturally be a fixer and an efficiency expert.

While on the other side of the table, the wife may struggle with feelings of inadequacy, so her husband's helpful suggestions may have the effect of simply feeding into her insecurities.

Where this situation might be his crap is him having to be right all the time, and to be competent in everyone's eyes (including his own). It might also be his crap if he doesn't take advantage of the opportunity to practice restraining the constant sharing of his great ideas, so as to not unnecessarily feed into her insecurities. Overcoming the need to be the "smartest guy in the room" may be another way the issue could be seen as an opportunity for him to work on his own stuff.

Where this might be her crap though, is the opportunity she has to learn to speak up for herself when his suggestions are not wanted or helpful to her. It might also be her crap for her to break through her default of seeing herself as inadequate and less-than. This would require her to not let his "helpful suggestions" any longer equate to any inadequacy on her part but be reframed in her mind as him just trying to be helpful. (Remember, different ways of doing things isn't less than!)

Each person can usually find something to work on in themselves in any given situation, but there are times when we unnecessarily get ourselves caught up in something that is the other's issue and not ours. It all goes back to concept #1 to just keep your focus on fixing yourself! ☺

## #7 -- Know You Were Attracted to Each Other for a Reason



One of the underlying and profound parts of doing marital therapy is my belief that every marriage has its divine purposes. It's helpful for couples to think through the notion that if they attracted each other, then there is some divine purpose for them within the experience of their relationship.

Nothing is ever really a mistake in technical terms, because of the Lord's matchless power to take all these things in marriage and give us experience and learning that will ultimately be for our eternal good (see D&C 122:7).

In marriage, we come together initially as two blissful halves, feeling a sense of completeness--like we have come home. But those complementary differing characteristics that first brought us together soon come to irritate and annoy, inviting both husband and wife to stretch and grow in ways where we may be underdeveloped or unpolished.

While the marital relationship may start with a husband who is outgoing and assertive (which could become obnoxious and demanding), and a wife who is kind and

patient (which could become boring and passionless), marriage has a way of requiring the husband to develop more kindness and patience and the wife more outgoingness and assertiveness.

These two complementary halves thus become increasingly whole and complete as each other's differences rub up against each other in their day-to-day lives. We tend to attract someone who has just the right strengths where we are weak, and just the right weaknesses where we are strong.

Marriage is divinely designed as a polishing process to smooth off our rough edges and help us finish our earthly mortal development. We ultimately become more whole as we work through our differences and change from two half people to two whole people.

## **#8 -- You Can't Fully Choose *In* If You Can't Choose *Out***

As a very "marriage-friendly therapist" this principle is not what I would ever have expected to say or believe, but after working with so many couples it has become apparent that spouses need to know that they genuinely can choose "out" or they really can't fully choose "in." If people feel like they are "stuck" and have no way out, they cannot fully dedicate their whole heart and soul to the marriage.

This concept connects to the important principle of agency. If the couple don't think they can choose out, then they technically do not really have the ability to choose in. It's a difficult but necessary process to help couples see that they do have a choice, and can make that choice (despite the consequences), so that they genuinely can choose to put their whole heart and soul back into the marriage.

## **#9 -- Your Thoughts Get Communicated as Nonverbal Messages**

We've all experienced a loved one walking into the room, where you immediately sense if they are in a good mood or a bad mood without them even saying a word. Couples have a hard time realizing that sensing what the other person is thinking and feeling happens all the time in communication. You may not say anything yet be accused of ill intentions because of the vibe you are sending. That is because what you are thinking or feeling gets communicated to your spouse through your non-verbal communication and maybe even through a form of spiritual sensing. You might think of this as the 80/20 communication rule where 80% of the message is coming from the non-verbal (including your internal thoughts and feelings), whereas only 20% of the message is coming from your words.

One wife struggled to communicate with her husband because she felt that she was always wrong and not as intelligent as her husband. The husband contended that he never said anything to make her feel that way, but as

we pursued what his thoughts, feelings and beliefs were, it became clear that he did think he was usually more right than her and did think he usually had the better solution. Being unaware of his thoughts and beliefs created defensiveness in her, which made their communication less than effective.

This concept requires husbands and wives to be more attentive to their thoughts and beliefs. It's not enough to just keep your mouth shut if you can't say something nice. You have to also change the vibe you're sending--the way you are thinking and seeing your spouse in order for them to not be constantly on the defensive. Just remember that whatever you are thinking comes through louder than what you are saying. You can each feel what the other is thinking, and that's generally what couples are really arguing about.

You can see how this creates a vicious cycle that goes around and around with no end in sight unless each spouse awakens to the messages they are inevitably sending out from their internal thoughts and feelings.

## **#10 -- Develop the Ability to Think Like Your Spouse**

One of the common questions I ask clients frequently, even while the other spouse is sitting right there, is "What do you think your spouse thinks about that?" Invariably I get a lot of responses of, "I don't know" or "Why don't you ask her/him?" The challenge is that if you cannot or will not develop the ability to try to learn to think like your spouse, then you will constantly be at odds with each other and/or clueless as to what is really going on.

It's a learned behavior to be able to set aside your own thoughts/perspective/needs/agenda to think from your spouse's point of view. When you at least try to imagine what they might be thinking or feeling you are practicing and developing empathy--the ability to see through their eyes and experience things from their perspective.

The good news is that as their spouse you hopefully know your spouse better than anyone else in the world. So, if couples are willing to work at this skill they will save themselves a lot of heartache because they will already be able to factor in where their spouse may be coming from without having to argue things out all the time or make unnecessarily painful choices.

I encourage you to practice asking yourself questions like "What would my spouse say?" "What would my spouse think about this?" And don't let yourself off easy by saying, "I don't know." Come up with a guess then check it out with your spouse until you get really good at knowing them so well.

## **#11 -- It Takes Time to Reap the Benefits of Your Changes**

After an affair, or some other painful betrayal, one spouse often feels like now that they have apologized and are

thinking and behaving differently that the betrayed spouse ought to be able to get on board and move on. The reality is that you don't get a say in when they feel there has been sufficient repair for them to be ready to let go and forgive. It is a very painful, up and down process for couples to repair and heal after many difficult marital issues. The betraying spouse must be willing and able to be patient, loving and continue to make needed repairs...*as long as it takes*. (Remember the offending spouse can also choose "out" if they don't like the repair process.)

Even with smaller issues like a spouse needing to help out around the house more, don't expect a huge response after only one day or one week of your new and improved behavior. All you can do is continue to do and be the kind of person that your spouse would want and feel safe to be close to again. You must trust that they will come around as soon as they can, because they don't like the tension and distance either. They are likely just being the way they are out of hurt and a need to protect themselves from more pain.

Even one year of new behavior may not fully make up for 10 years of mistreatment. So, although it's never completely one-sided, the challenge for the offending spouse will be to make the necessary changes in both heart, mind and behavior, and to be that new person long enough for the other to be assured that the changes are genuine and here to stay, in order for them to let down their wall.

## #12 -- Grieving and Surrender are Necessary in Marriage

Marriage is not only a surprise grab bag, but is also a package deal that comes with some negatives as well as the positives. At some point in your marriage you will be called upon to accept the reality of your spouse and your relationship. You will even be required to grieve the spouse you had wanted or maybe even thought you married. There will be things you hoped for and even believed you were getting that may not turn out to be the case, or may change somewhere along the way.

I frequently share the grief and loss cycle with clients as well as my outline of what it takes to divinely surrender things you cannot change. You can either demand that your spouse be different than they are, or you can grieve your loss of hopes and dreams. Demanding never brings about the healthy or long-lasting changes you desire.

There is no agency in demands. If you want more sex from your spouse and demand it, you negate the very chance of them being able to give it to you freely, because it is no longer a choice. It is now a self-focused demand that if responded to simply becomes sex out of obligation. Duty sex is not usually what spouses are genuinely longing for. So, it's definitely a catch 22 if you can't grieve and surrender what may be your current situation.

People can and do change all the time (not without much time and effort though). Your spouse can certainly become all that you ever dreamed of, but you must know that that is most likely to occur after you've let go of the need for your spouse to do certain things or be a certain way. It is unconditional love and divine surrender and acceptance of *what is* that creates the best environment for positive, self-initiated change to occur in your marriage.

In this process you may again reach a point when you either have to: 1) decide to leave, 2) decide to stay and be miserable, or 3) decide to stay and grieve the spouse you wish you had and love the one you have instead. One of the ways you facilitate this is to focus your attention on his/her strengths, not their weaknesses.

Grieving and surrendering are inevitable aspects of marriage. Remember you were attracted to your spouse for a divine purpose even if you feel like you were gypped, and didn't know what you were getting yourself into. God knew, and I believe your spirit knew. If you choose to stay through the difficulties and will endure the painful refining process in marriage you can come to find out why you are in the marriage you are in and come to reap the incredibly blessed benefits of a marriage relationship that has made it through the storms.

Take advantage of these free "counseling sessions" by identifying the areas you need to work on, and commit yourself to making the needed changes. As you work to overcome your negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors, you can begin to create the sweet and satisfying marital relationship of your dreams.

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Marriage and intimacy expert, Laura M. Brotherson, LMFT, CST is the author of the best-selling book, [And They Were Not Ashamed](#) and [Knowing HER Intimately](#), and host of "[The Marital Intimacy Show](#)." As a marriage counselor and certified sex therapist, Laura helps couples navigate the intricacies of intimacy to build stronger marriages and families.

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