



MONTREAL CLINIC FOR THERAPY SERVICES

What Brings Couples to Therapy?

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In the past 20 years, much has been learned about what makes couples either happy and devoted to one another or miserable and headed for a break-up. A discussion of the specific variables associated with couple satisfaction or dissatisfaction is beyond the scope of this article (*for more information see seven signs of relationship satisfaction/dissatisfaction*). Suffice it to say that the findings in this area of research can be summarized as follows; (1) happy couples are kind to one another; and (2) unhappy couples get caught up in a negative cycle of frustration and contempt which they are unable to break. It's really that simple!

So why are some couples capable of consistently displaying kind and supportive behaviors while others aren't? If it's really as simple as being kinder, why can't we all be more loving towards our partners? Couple interactions are no different than behavior in general; what we do stems from what we believe. Happy couples are kind to one another because they view their partners in a positive light. In fact, happy couples sometimes even perceive what appear to be flaws as positive characteristics. For example, someone else might perceive your husband as lazy but you admire his calm demeanor. "That's just fabrication", you say. I say, "You may be correct", however, such slightly distorted positive beliefs allow someone to be kind when they can easily be fuming. Being positive about our relationship isn't always easy; sometimes we have to trick ourselves.

If positive beliefs are at the core of kind behaviors and couple satisfaction, then certain negative beliefs must sustain the negative interaction cycle associated with unhappy couples. In my clinical experience, the main negative belief which brings couples to therapy is, "My partner doesn't love me". Let me illustrate this point by recounting an interesting anecdote about one of my experiences in couple therapy. The couple I am referring to was in one important respect similar to most couples I work with, they argued a lot! Despite constant bickering, they managed to remain married for more than 10 years. In the days leading to their decision to consult with me their arguments had become more intense. We worked on communication skills such as listening, being assertive rather than aggressive, ways to de-escalate conflict, all with moderate success. During one particular session, I interrupted the gentleman to ask both clients a question "Is anybody in here actually leaving?" At first they looked a little stunned, and then he replied, "What do you mean?" "I mean, is anybody in here planning on leaving their spouse – are you planning on divorcing her?" "NO!" he replied. "I love her very much". "How about you, are you divorcing him?" I asked. "No, I'm not going anywhere", she replied. By this time both individuals were looking at each other with smiles on their faces.

At the beginning of the next session, he recounted an interesting story about what had occurred when they walked out of my office at the conclusion of our previous session. While waiting for the elevator, she turned to him and said, "Every morning when you wake up I want you to tell yourself that I'm not going anywhere." He was very touched by her words. It was obvious that the couple had made an important breakthrough. Soon after, I received an e-mail thanking me for helping them to realize they loved each other and that my services were no longer needed. I haven't seen them since. I'm not sure how they're doing. They may still be arguing too much but since realizing that they love each other they haven't needed therapy.



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This story illustrates a pattern which I see on a fairly regular basis with couples seeking therapy. They're stuck in a negative cycle because they fear that their partner doesn't love them. The reality is that individuals who consult for couple therapy often love each other desperately but are afraid to display their affection because of their fear that their partner won't reciprocate in kind. Let me end with this, for those of you who feel uncomfortable with the idea of having to trick yourself into believing that your partner is wonderful in order to be happy consider this, "Are you tricking yourself into believing that your partner doesn't love you?"