

What Happens in Couples Therapy

by Margery Silverton, LCSW-C
Certified Imago Relationship Therapist

Introduction

For over three decades, I have counseled hundreds of individuals and couples on the best methods of achieving and sustaining a satisfying relationship. Since training as an Imago therapist in 1991, coaching couples in a powerful set of processes designed to help partners develop self awareness regarding core emotional needs, understand and constructively manage negative emotions, and facilitate deep levels of healing and personal growth. The ultimate goal of this work is to help couples transform their relationship so that it becomes a lasting source of support, love, and companionship. In short, my goal with the couples I work with is to help them become passionate best friends, able to be fully alive and self-loving in each other's presence.



Margery and her husband Steve

Couples who "stay the course" and successfully complete the therapy state that they feel an enhanced sense of possibility, hopefulness and expansiveness both as individuals and as partners in a relationship.

If you are someone wanting to attain this level of impassioned aliveness in your intimate relationship, several things need to take place. You need to develop self awareness about your own needs, how you tend to react when those needs are frustrated, and how your reactive patterns have affected your partner. You need good coaching in how to effectively identify needs and communicate about your desires, and you need to practice putting certain behavior changes into practice. You need to feel in your heart that you want the relationship to work, and at a deep level, you need to have faith that a healthy, loving relationship—with all its challenges and ups and downs—is possible for you. You also need to develop the capacity to manage your feelings so that the inevitable conflicts that occur in the course of a relationship don't send you into a spiral of despair. To transform a troubled relationship, you also need patience and a healthy curiosity about how this person "from the other planet" thinks, feels, and operates.

It is not possible to have intimacy unless there is also vulnerability to one another. When we are in pain, and believe we need to harden around our pain, we have entered a cycle of defensiveness, in which neither partner can feel deeply known. Frustrated needs create pain, pain creates guardedness, guardedness creates distancing and disconnection. Many couples who seek counseling come in feeling demoralized and doubtful about the possibility of healing. In fact, research indicates that most couples wait at least six years from the time a problem is first acknowledged to the time they seek therapy to help resolve it. The longer a couple waits, the more time there is for the frustration cycle to become entrenched. In successful therapy, the downward spiral of the frustration cycle is reversed and transformed into a "satisfaction" cycle instead. Deeply held needs are identified, and new strategies are developed to consciously address these needs.

All couples, even the happiest ones, encounter some form of let down, where commitment begins to flag, and energies tend to go outside the relationship. One of the first requirements in therapy is to reinvest energy in the relationship before the motivation dies off completely. Like a sickly plant that needs nurturing and watering to bring it back to life, there comes a point where too little, too late, and the plant dies. If the sickly plant is watered in time, given the proper attention, care and sunlight, then it can revive and be a

source of beauty and joy for a long time to come. When partners come in for relationship therapy, just the act of being in the room together and engaging in meaningful conversation can start the process of rejuvenation and re-energizing.

From Romance to the Power Struggle: The Problem

It is no secret that sustaining love over the long haul is no easy task. Most of us long for the "in love" feeling that we had in the beginning stages of our courtship, but eventually the romantic feelings wear thin, and we wonder how what started out feeling so good could turn into something that feels so bad. How could this happen? Over time, it is not possible to continue putting our best foot forward. Eventually, the best selves we were in the beginning of our romance give way to the true selves we really are, with all our warts, limitations and undeveloped, immature parts. The Jerry Seinfeld show plays with this truth as comedy, and helps us to laugh at our selfish, darker tendencies. In one episode, Seinfeld has recently ended a relationship, and observes the selfishness of his friend, George. He tells George, with shocked realization, "I am just a child. You are just a child. We are 30 years old, but we are children!"



It is upsetting to realize and acknowledge our own limitations. But it is almost more horrifying to see our partner's warts, and our partner is equally horrified by ours. The realization that our partner is so limited and has such warts plunges us into a power struggle. Once this struggle begins, we experience our partner, not as the lover and friend we had hoped to find, but as the enemy we most feared. Once we sense our partner as a source of danger and pain, rather than a source of pleasure, we go into "old brain" mode—angrily trying to get our needs met, or coldly constricting ourselves to remain safe and untouchable.

An Attempt at Solution

How do we turn this situation around? Our natural tendency is to try to turn it around by whatever methods we used as a child to help us manage our fears, frustrations and vulnerabilities. Simply put, we do with our partners what we learned to do with our primary caretakers. For example, maybe we had a mother or father who suffered from depression, and we learned that it was our role to cheer them up. We become "Daddy's little sunshine, or Mommy's little clown." We become very skilled at tuning into our parents' moods so that we can please them. We develop an adaptation as a pleaser, always cheerful, always joking. In later life, we tend to form romantic attachments to our "Imago match," that person who is similar enough to our parents that we feel comfortable, and can assume a familiar role. In this case, it is likely that we will feel most comfortable with someone who is somewhat distant and depressed so that we can cheer him or her up. Eventually though, our partner will complain of our incessant joking around and we will complain of our partner's incessant down mood. In an attempt to solve the problem, we up the ante by doing even more of what we naturally do. Our partner is depressed and feels disconnected. We joke around even harder. What we try to do to solve the problem BECOMES the problem!

As another example, perhaps we learned that when our parents were fighting, our pain and fear lessened once we got out of the house and played outside. We learned that by getting away and taking care of

ourselves, we felt better. "Getting away" becomes our adaptive style.

The fascinating thing about relationships is that the person who tends to adapt by getting away and being self sufficient tends to fall in love with a person whose adaptive style is to "get in there" and fight for relational connection. I call this the orchid/cactus relationship. The cactus manages very well with distance. The orchid thrives by symbiosis. During the romantic phase, a cactus loves the closeness attained by having the beautiful orchid care for him, and the orchid admires the ability of the cactus to be so self sufficient. This works for a while, until the orchid



starts complaining about how the cactus never seems to need anything and is too emotionally distant. The cactus doesn't understand. He believes he is just being a good cactus, as always. The power struggle begins: the criticisms intensify, and the cactus fears his lovely orchid is about to suck the life out of him. He plays his strongest game: the spines get sharper to ward her off, and he goes off on his own to play (or work) outside. This tactic works for the cactus. It just doesn't work for the orchid, who of course, tries to wrap her roots tighter. Once again, the strategy designed to solve the problem only makes it worse.

On a purely individual level, we have learned what we need to do to make the pain stop. And what we do to preserve ourselves usually works—or it at least it helped us survive the wounds of our childhoods. The biological imperative towards self-preservation is so strong that we WILL do what we believe we must to stay alive. Based on our temperament, we developed our adaptive style, designed to keep us safe and make our anxiety go away. Just as in the animal kingdom, we use our best methods of defense. We get prickly like the porcupine, we bare our fangs, we withdraw into our shell like the turtle, we freeze like a frightened deer, we cloud the situation by shooting ink into the water like an octopus, we roll over and play dead. Male rats fight. The female rat, when under stress, will often fiercely protect the young or may go into "nesting overdrive"—compulsively cleaning or grooming. You can probably think of other examples of how animals defend themselves when endangered, and chances are, those methods can be found between two human beings. Take a moment to think about it. You may be very clear on what method your partner uses, and equally clear that it doesn't help you feel any closer to him or her. Now think again. What method do you use? Does it help your pain go away? Does it work with your partner? Does that method open the door to healing and to understanding, or does it escalate the tensions?



Whatever method you use when under stress, and we all have our methods, it is a strategy that is based on the prime imperative to stay alive. The fight/flight, freeze/submit pattern is hard wired into the human brain just as it is hard wired into the brains of reptiles and mammals. In fact, brain researchers refer to our "old brain" as the reptilian and mammalian brains, because these parts of the brain, or limbic system, serve basic survival functions similar to those of our animal cousins. The reptilian brain is responsible for basic regulatory functions, and the mammalian brain, is the seat of the primal emotions—fear, anger,

reproductive urges, and nurturance. Once our partner becomes "the enemy" by behaving in hurtful ways, the old brain tells us we need to do whatever it takes to stay safe. The attempt at solution makes our partner feel unsafe.

What is the Good News About Relationships?

The bad news about intimacy is that once we form an attachment to a partner, we are ultimately disappointed because we tend to choose partners who are limited in the very ways where we are most in need. Our unconscious tends to pick mates for us who, on the surface look good, but then under the surface wound us in our most vulnerable places. Our Imago match is the person with whom we have business.

It is this person who can most re-wound us because of the similarity to our primary caretaker, but for the same reason, this person, when called to awaken, can also be our best healers. This is the good news, that if we can become conscious of our needs, and the legitimate needs of our partners, we can become healers to each other instead of re-wounders. How is this possible? Because of even more good news: as powerful as our limbic systems are in triggering our survival response to stress, we are much bigger than our limbic system.



What makes us different from our friends in the animal kingdom is that we have a more complicated brain than theirs. Although when under stress, we may by-pass this part of our brain, we do also have a highly evolved neo-cortex—that part of the brain which is capable of complex thought sequences and creative problem solving, of intentionality, and of ethical, spiritual, and moral behavior. Thanks to our neo-cortex, there is hope for us in our relationships. If it makes sense to this part of the brain to do something other than be reactive, we can learn to do the counter-intuitive thing. We don't HAVE to go into fight/flight behavior, even though our limbic system is triggered. To have a good relationship, we MUST mature into newer, more highly evolved forms of behavior. We can slow down our reactivity, go from the back of our heads to the front of our heads. As Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. states in his book, *Getting the The Love You Want*, conflict can be understood as "growth trying to happen." We are reactive to our partners because they want something from us we don't know how to give. We must learn to give it.

To be safe in a long term relationship with a partner, we must make a commitment to being a safe person for our partners. We must end blaming and criticism, because it doesn't work. Although we cannot change our basic temperaments, we most certainly can stop behaviors which cause pain to our partners. We truly only get the love we want, reality love, when we stop doing what we've always thought we needed to do to stay alive, and learn to do something else instead. We must stop being selfish and immature, like George, Jerry, and Elaine—and grow into more conscious, intentional, respectful partners. The only thing that really heals relationship pain is heartfelt, empathic acknowledgment of the other and a willingness to change hurtful behaviors into healing behaviors. Nothing else works. As we practice what Dr Hendrix calls "stretching behaviors," those behaviors that may go against our natural tendencies, but are what our partners need to experience healing, we also reclaim a part of ourselves that was cut off long ago, the part that couldn't exist or never developed in our childhoods.

How Does Imago Therapy Help?

A major assumption of Imago Relationship Therapy is that the psychological purpose of marriage is to provide a context for the healing of childhood wounds and the growth/expansion of the human spirit. At its best, marriage provides us with a secure emotional attachment, gives us someone to turn to at the end of the day, strengthens our identity as a lovable worthwhile person, and gives a reason to continue growing and becoming more competent in the world. We have chosen our Imago match to help us with these psychological tasks. To quote Harville again, "romantic love is nature's way of getting us attached to an incompatible person so that we will do the healing and growing we need to do." Romantic love is supposed to end, but so is the power struggle. When we successfully work through the issues in the power struggle, we form a more organic bond, based on respect, maturity and valuing of our partner. "Reality love is romantic love transformed by wisdom and experience."



Imago therapy helps by creating a safe space for couples to bring their hurts and frustrations. Couples are coached in a skill - the Intentional Dialogue - for communicating to each other their deepest concerns, and they are given a structure for how to divide attention so that both parties have a chance to be fully heard. Imago therapy helps by giving insight into why certain frustrations are so hurtful, given their linkages to childhood pain, and by giving partners a way to understand each other and a motivation to change behaviors based on a combination of compassion and enlightened self interest.

Does it Work?

Can a cactus ever learn to like closeness, and can an orchid ever learn to be self sustaining? The idea is not to change the cactus into a different kind of plant, or the orchid either. But it is definitely possible for the two plant forms to live in close proximity to each other without threatening each other's lives and causing pain. If these two plants sought therapy to improve their relationship, and really basically liked each other, wonderful possibilities exist. The cactus can soften its spines, and not be so damaging to the orchid's petals. The orchid can loosen it's parasitic grip, and develop ways of being self sustaining. Like anything else in life, Imago therapy works to the extent that both parties are committed to the process. Also, like anything else in life, there is no easy fix. However, I can honestly say after ten years of being an Imago therapist, I have seen miracle transformations take place once a couple brings their full energy to the therapy.



Sometimes, a partner will get clarity that the commitment just isn't there. I would say this is a case of the therapy working by clarifying long standing ambivalence, and allowing separation to take place with less rancor than would be there otherwise. This outcome is one scenario. My experience is that, if a couple is basically well intended toward each other, a tremendous amount of healing and growth can take place. These couples are successful in clarifying the source of their frustrations, learning to communicate their deep needs to each other in a way that they can be addressed, establishing a well endowed "relationship

bank account," appreciating each person's unique strengths, accepting each other's foibles, and creating bonds of trust, security, and pleasure that will carry them through a life time.

When a couple leaves my office smiling, crying, laughing, playful, impish—fully alive and "juicy" in each other's presence, then I can take pleasure that our work together has been successful. I can say "next" to the new couple in the waiting room with a bit more hope in my heart.