

What Do Couples Therapists Know?
Elaine Chan-Scherer, LCSW
California Counseling Institute

Couples therapists know that people don't choose each other for the reasons that they think. Think about it – how many people are not attracted to someone who looks great for them on paper? How many people are attracted to people who seem “wrong” for them? What we call “chemistry”, intense attraction, the Hollywood idea of being in love – are actually the workings of our unconscious.

We develop the idea of what “love” is based on our interactions with our primary caregivers. Harville Hendrix, Ph.D., a famous couples therapist, talks about the “Imago”. This is the image that we develop of love– a compilation of the good and bad from our primary caregivers. When our unconscious spots the imago in another person, we feel attracted. If we had parents who were consistent and caring and able to attend to our needs, we will be attracted to a partner with these traits. If one of our parents abandoned us when we were young, or was emotionally unavailable for us for whatever reasons, then we will be attracted to someone who will eventually trigger that feeling of abandonment.

Both partners, however, are usually unconscious about this. Have you noticed how relationships change after you get married? People often find themselves acting in habitual ways that mimic the emotional interactions in their families of origin. Perhaps it is because the psyche is able to relax. We often find that we ended up, unbeknownst to us, marrying someone who is like our mother or father. There is a healing purpose for this madness. Salvation, you might say. It is necessary for us to marry partners who will recreate our childhood wounding scenarios, because if our partner is able to respond in a way that our caregivers were not, our deepest wounds are healed and we come closer to wholeness.

So, in this view of marriage, conflict is necessary and good. Couples often feel hopeless when they reach a point of severe conflict in their marriages. The feeling is uncomfortable, but if they can work through it (therapy is helpful), the marriage can progress to the next level. Just as our two year olds need to say “no” and our teenagers need to rebel to develop a healthy sense of individuation (knowing that they are whole and separate people), our marriages also need to develop to the level where we are individuals with different needs and wants and desires who choose to be married to each other.

Here are my favorite marriage/long-term relationship tips:

1. John Gottman, a researcher and therapist in Seattle, has found that it is more important how you treat each other when you are getting along than when you are fighting. It is important to connect with each other in small and familiar ways many times each day (a touch, a glance, paying attention to what the other is saying). If you attend to your partner's attempts to get your attention, this puts energy in the love bank which will see you thru rough times. Contempt can be fatal in your marriage. If you find yourself or your partner rolling their eyes, it's time to take a look at the source of their discontent.
2. When you are angry, take a tip from Peter Pearson and Ellyn Bader from the Couples Therapy Institute in Menlo Park – Be Curious, Not Furious. Try to understand your partner's position. Be a journalist, a roving reporter, and find out what it is like to be in your partner's shoes.

3. When discussing difficult things, become a mirror. Let your partner speak, and repeat back what you have heard, then ask her/him if you “got” it all. If not, let them correct you and then repeat back until your partner thinks that you understand their position. Then switch roles. Our deepest longing is to be seen and heard and held as the beloved. Reflecting back to our partner their experience (instead of solving the problem) deepens the connection in a relationship.
4. Avoid name-calling, blaming, and generalizing. Take a time out if you are too angry to listen and come back together when you are both calmer.
5. Maximize pleasurable interactions; things that make you feel connected. One of the latest books out says that women feel closer when they talk about the relationship and men feel more tense (they feel blamed or that they need to solve the problem) when they are asked to talk about the relationship. No matter how much stress you may be experiencing, you need to increase the times you connect through shared activities, hobbies, sex, touch, and being kind to each other.

One thing that couples therapists also know is that it is much easier to help couples SOONER rather than LATER. It’s best to go to therapy when you are beginning to feel stuck. You can learn tools that will help to keep your relationship unstuck. When there is a lot of water under the bridge, we are still able to help couples, but it is much more complicated and it takes much longer than for those people who come in earlier.

Your marriage can be a path toward wholeness for each of you.