

How to  
Get  
the Most  
from  
Imago  
Couples Therapy

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# How to Get the Most from Imago Couples Therapy

This document is designed to help you get the most benefit from our work together in Imago Relationship Therapy. The first three sections deal with how to prepare for and maximize the value of our sessions. The fourth section summarizes some brief concepts about relationships and productive couples therapy. In the back are listed additional resources.

If you are reading this booklet, you have made a decision to begin what you know you have to do in order to “save your life”. Your relationship may not be saved if you do not embark on this work. Your job is to create your own individual objectives for being in therapy with your partner.

Like a good coach, my job is to help you reach these objectives. I have many, many tools to help you become a more effective partner - they work best when you are clear about how you aspire to be. My goal is to help you each make better adjustments and responses to each other without violating your core values or deeply held principles. Reaching this goal will entail a journey of creating safety so that a garden of passion, empathy and intimacy may flourish. Considering all this, I am drawn to the sentiments of Mary Oliver, who writes:

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# The Journey

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice -  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.

“Mend my life!”

Each voice cried.

But you didn't stop.

You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations,  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.

It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.

But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice

The stars  
began to burn  
through  
the sheets of  
clouds

which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do -  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.

Mary Oliver  
New and Selected Poems, Volume One  
Beacon Press, Boston, 1992

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## Goals and Objectives of Couples Therapy

The major aim of Imago relationship therapy is to make your self conscious by increasing your knowledge about yourself, your partner and the patterns of interaction between you. Therapy becomes effective as you apply new knowledge to break ineffective patterns and develop better ones.

The key tasks of couples therapy are increasing your clarity about:

- 1 The kind of partner you aspire to be in order to build the kind of life and relationship you want to create. A Vision of You in Relationship
- 1 Your individual blocks to becoming the kind of partner you aspire to be. The Exits You Take. The Character Traits Which Block You.
- 1 The skills and knowledge necessary to do the about tasks. All Dialogue Processes.

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# Two

## Tradeoffs and Tough Choices

To create sustained improvement in your relationship you need:

- t A vision of the life you want to build together and individually
- t The appropriate attitudes and skills to work as a team
- t The motivation to persist
- t Time to review progress

To create the relationship you really desire, there will be some difficult tradeoffs and tough choices for each person.

***The first tradeoff will be time.*** It simply takes time to create a relationship that flourishes - time to be together - time to play - coordinate - nurture - relax - hang out - plan - family time, etc. This time will encroach on some other valuable areas - your personal or professional time. You are being asked to invest from 12 - 15 session in your work as a couple. You also have the option of having longer sessions

***The second compromise is comfort.*** That means emotional comfort, like going out on a limb to try novel ways of thinking or doing things, listening and being curious instead of butting in, speaking up instead of becoming resentfully compliant or withdrawing. In Imago, you will hear the story of the Turtle and the Hailstorm and identify your primary

style. At the beginning, there will be emotional risk taking action, but you will never explore different worlds if you always keep sight of the shoreline. In addition, few people are emotionally comfortable being confronted with how they don't live their values or being confronted with the consequences of their actions.

The third compromise is stretching. It simply takes effort to sustain improvement over time - staying conscious of making a difference over time - remembering to be more respectful, more giving, more appreciative etc. It takes effort to remember and act. It is an act of grace to stretch to meet your partners needs and to love him or her in the ways they need to be love.

The other effort is even more difficult for some people - that is improving their reaction to problems. For example, if one person is hypersensitive to criticism, and his/her partner is hypersensitive to feeling ignored, it will take effort to improve their sensitivity instead of hoping the partner will stop ignoring or criticizing.

In all these areas, there is generally a conflict between short-term gratification and the long-term goal of creating a satisfying relationship. The blunt reality is that, in an interdependent relationship, effort is required on the part of each person to make a sustained improvement. It is like pairs figure skating - one person cannot do most of the work and still create an exceptional team. The process called Couples Dialogue will be of primary importance.

## Three

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# How to Maximize the Value from your Couples Therapy Sessions

A common yet unproductive pattern in couples therapy is making the focus be whatever problem happens to be on someone's mind at the moment. This is a reactive (and mostly ineffective) approach to working things through.

The second unproductive pattern is showing up with each person saying, "I don't know what to talk about, do you?" While this blank slate approach may open some interesting doors, it is a hit or miss process.

The third common unproductive pattern is discussing whatever fight you are in at the moment or whatever fight you had since the last meeting. Discussing these fights/arguments without a larger context of what you wish to learn from the experience is often an exercise in spinning your wheels. It is a form of "stuckness" that we don't want to duplicate. Learning from a sort of "post mortem" can be useful.

Over time, repeating these patterns will lead to the plaintive question, "Are we getting anywhere?"

A more powerful approach to your couples therapy sessions is for each person to do the following before each session:

1. Reflect on your objectives for being in therapy.  
Refer to your vision statement often as a way of

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keeping in touch with your larger objective..

2. Think about your next step that supports or relates to your larger objectives for the kind of relationship you wish to create, or the partner you aspire to become. How you are in the present moment determines your future.

This reflection takes some effort. Yet few people would call an important meeting and then say, “Well, I don’t have anything to bring up, does anyone else have anything on their agenda?” Your preparation will pay high dividends.

Another practice is to journal after every session or even review what you are learning and what your aspirations are in Couples Dialogue format.

# Four

## Brief Concepts for Couples Therapy and Relationships

The following ideas can help identify areas of focus in our work and/or stimulate discussion between you and your partner between meetings. If you periodically review this list, you will discover that your reflections and associations will change over time. So please revisit this list often, it will help you keep focus during your work.

### *Attitude is Key*

When it comes to improving your relationship, your attitude toward change is more important than what action you take.

What to do and how to do it can often be easily identified. The real challenge is why you don't do it.

How to think differently about a problem is often more effective than just trying to figure out what action to take.

Your partner is quite limited in his/her ability to respond to you. You are quite limited in your ability to respond to your partner. Accepting that is a huge step into maturity. You will be asked to "stretch" toward your partner in specific ways during your work.

The definite possibility exists that you have some flawed

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assumptions about your partner's motives. And that he/she has some flawed assumptions about yours. The problem is, most of the time we don't want to believe those assumptions are flawed. In Imago work, we have a phrase whose meaning will become clearer to you: "My partners needs are a blueprint for my growth."

### ***Focus on Changing Yourself Rather than Your Partner***

Couples therapy works best if you have more goals for yourself than for your partner. I am at my best when I help you reach objectives you set for yourself.

Problems occur when reality departs sharply from your expectations, hopes, desires and concerns. It's human nature to try and change one's partner instead of adjusting our expectations. This aspect of human nature is what keeps therapists in business.

The hardest part of couples therapy is accepting you will need to improve your response to a problem (how you think about it, feel about it, or what to do about it). Very few people want to focus on improving their response. It's more common to build a strong case for why the other should do the improving. All dialogue processes are geared toward improving your response to your partner.

You can't change your partner. Your partner can't change you. You can influence each other, but that doesn't mean you can change each other. Becoming a more effective partner is the most efficient way to change a relationship. The Imago Process of requesting partner change is unusual

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and avoids demands, emotional manipulation and bargaining.



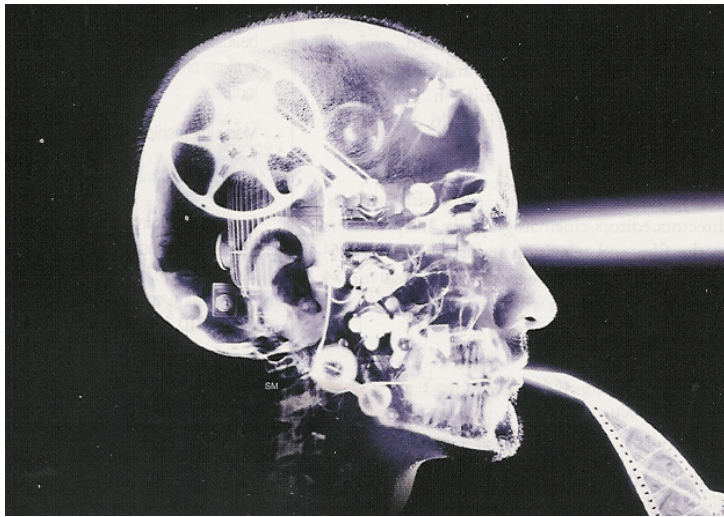
It's easy to be considerate and loving to your partner when the vistas are magnificent, the sun is shining and breezes are gentle. But when it gets bone chilling cold, you're hungry and tired, and your partner is whining and sniveling about how you got them into this mess, that's when you get tested. You can join the finger pointing or become how you aspire to become.

Nothing is impossible for the person who doesn't have to do it.

Fear lets you know you're not prepared. If you view fear in that mode, it becomes a signal to prepare the best you can.

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You can learn a lot about yourself by understanding what annoys you and how you handle it. When you focus on your own emotional identification rather than your partner's annoying behavior, you're making great progress. You'll be learning a lot about the **process of projection** and how it can help you know yourself better.



The more you believe your partner should be different, the less initiative you will take to change the patterns between you.

## ***Zen Aspects of Couples Therapy (Some Contradictions)***

All major goals have built in contradictions, for example, speak up or keep the peace.

All significant growth comes from disagreements, dissatisfaction with the current status, or a striving to make things better. Paradoxically, accepting that conflict produces growth and learning to manage inevitable disagreements is the key to more harmonious relationships.

It's not what you say. It's what they hear. Remember this as you begin to learn the mirroring process.

Solutions, no matter how perfect, set the stage for new problems.

### ***Tough Questions***

Asking good questions - of yourself and your partner - helps you uncover causes beneath causes. You'll eventually discover unhealed wounds which are the driving force for most conflicts and frustrations.

In a strong disagreement, do you really believe your partner is entitled to their opinion?

Under duress, do you have the courage and tenacity to seek your partner's reality and the courage to express your reality when the stakes are high? Learn to nurture a curious spirit in

regard to yourself and your partner.

Why is it important to let your partner know what you think, feel and are concerned about? (Because they cannot appreciate what they don't understand.) What is the price your partner will have to pay to improve their response to you? How much do you care about the price they will have to pay? (Everything has a price and we always pay it.)

Can you legitimately expect your partner to treat you better than you treat him/her?

If you want your partner to change, do you think about what you can do to make it easier?

When a problem shows up, it's natural to think "What should I do about it? A much more productive question is "How do I aspire to be in this situation?"

### ***The Importance of Communication***

The four most important qualities of effective communication are safety, respect, openness and persistence. You may find the dialogue processes conducive to these qualities. Good communication is much more difficult than most people want to believe. Effective negotiation is even harder.

A couple's vision emerges from a process of reflection and inquiry. It requires both people to speak from the heart about what really matters to each.

As adults, we are all responsible for how we express

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ourselves, no matter how others treat us.



Communication is the number one presenting problem in couples counseling. Effective communication means you need to pay attention to:

- t Managing unruly emotions, such as intense anger
- t How you are communicating - whining, blaming, vague, etc. “Faux Dialogue”.
- t What you want from your partner during the discussion. This implies that you know yourself.
- t What the problem symbolizes to you.
- t The outcome you want from the discussion

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- t Your partner's major concerns
- t How you can help your partner become more responsive to you
- t The beliefs and attitudes you have about the problem.

No wonder good communication is so hard.

### ***Some Final Thoughts***

You can't create a flourishing relationship by only fixing what's wrong. But it's a start.

Grace under pressure does not spring full-grown even with the best of intentions - practice, practice and more practice. Practice right things and you will get there.

Love is destroyed when self-interest dominates.

If you don't know what you feel in important areas of your relationship, it is like playing high stakes poker when you see only half your cards. You will make a lot of dumb plays.

The possibility exists that we choose partners we need but don't necessarily want. Thus in most relationships, the early "in love" phase is followed by disillusionment and we think we may have chosen the wrong partner.

To get to the bottom of a problem often means you first accept now complex it is.

Trust is the foundational building block of a flourishing relationship. You create trust by doing what you say you will do.

It's impossible to be in a highly interdependent relationship without ever being judgmental or being judged.

If you strive to always feel emotionally safe in your relationship and get it, you will pay the price of becoming dull. Dialogue process creates safety to deal with that which may not feel safe at all.

If both of you never rock the boat, you will end up with a dull relationship.

Knowledge is power. Only knowledge that is applied is power.

Most of the ineffective things we do in relationships fall into just a few categories:

- t Blame or attempt to dominate
- t Disengage/withdraw
- t Resentful compliance
- t Whine
- t Denial or confusion

These are the normal emotional reactions to feeling a threat or high stress. Improving your relationship means better management of these reactions.

Do you legitimately expect your partner to treat you better

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than you treat yourself.

Everything you do works for some part of you, even if other parts of you don't like it.

Everything you do that takes a sustained effort is governed by three motivations:

- 1 Avoid pain or discomfort
- 1 The benefits involved
- 1 Be a better person

It's also true for your partner.

If you are asking your partner to change something, sometimes it's a good idea to ask if the change is consistent with how they aspire to be in that situation.

Businesses and marriages fail for the same three reasons. A failure to:

- 1 Learn from the past
- 1 Adapt to changing conditions
- 1 Predict probable future problems and take action

Effective change requires insight plus action. Action without insight is thoughtless. Insight without action is passivity.

If you want to create a win-win solution, you cannot hold a position that has caused your partner to lose in the past.

Finally, to elaborate on Mary Oliver's poem, to "save" oneself is to acknowledge that one is worth preserving and

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serving. As you embark on this journey of serving yourself, caring for yourself, you will be learning how better to preserve and serve your partnership as well. Let's begin.

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## ***Resources & Readings***

### *Imago Couples Group Therapy*

Up to five couples meet on Saturday morning every other week to fine  
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tune their relationship skills and to learn and to inspire one another. Facilitated by Michael Scott. Prerequisites are to complete a Getting the Love You Want workshop and/or to complete a course of 15 sessions with any certified Imago Relationship Therapist. Fee is \$140 per couple per session and a minimum commitment of 12 sessions is required.

### *Imago Therapy Manual*

Contains a large variety of exercises and experiences which can be used both in session and at home. Cost is \$25 and pages may be duplicated by the couple. I may ask you to purchase one for your work.

### *Workshops for Couples and Singles*

**Pasadena:** check website [pasadenainstitute.com](http://pasadenainstitute.com) for dates and other information. Bruce Crapuchettes, PhD.

**Long Beach:** check website [relationshipsolutions.org](http://relationshipsolutions.org) for dates and information. Waverly Farrell, MFT

**Imago International** website [imagorelationships.org](http://imagorelationships.org)

### *Books by Harville Hendrix, PhD and Helen Hunt, MA*

“Getting the Love You Want”, A Guide for Couples, 1988

“Keeping the Love You Find”, A Guide for Singles, 1992

“Giving the Love that Heals”, A Guide for Parenting, 1997

“Receiving Love”, Great Imago Summary Plus, 2004