



Marital Therapy ...Alone?

■ by Debi Mitchell, MS, LMFT

"The more you invest in your marriage, the more valuable it becomes." ~Unknown
"Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." ~ Dr. Seuss

Many people greatly desire to improve or save their marriages. They know traditional marital therapy won't occur but hesitate to voice this in individual therapy. Eventually, the question echoes: "Will marriage therapy help if my spouse won't come?"

Any successful therapy depends on multiple factors. Individual marital therapy's success increases significantly when we choose our committed will, concentrated thoughts, and changed behaviors.

Committed Will

We tend to judge commitment by our spouses' willingness to attend counseling. We need to be careful, though. We can be committed and unwilling- or unable- to attend. Generally, this stems from two different types of commitment:

- Courageous
- Confining

Courageous Commitment

Google dictionary gives many synonyms for one type of commitment including *dedication, devotion, loyalty, and faithfulness*. This type of commitment runs deep. Do we dedicate ourselves to our marriage and spouse—spirit, soul, and body—even when we are unhappy? Do we faithfully demonstrate loyalty to our spouse, even when others make fun of traits we don't even like?

Some consider this commitment level silly, but I consider it courageous. In the story of Jesus walking on the water (Matthew 14:22-34), courage describes Peter stepping out of the boat. Peter ignored the storm to walk on water; I imagine the other disciples thought Peter's level of commitment was foolish. Marital therapy works best when both commit courageously to the marriage and each other, even when only one attends.

Confining Commitment

For some, courageous commitment morphs into another type of commitment. Merriam Webster's online dictionary describes it as "an engagement or obligation that restricts freedom of action." In other words, courage transforms into a ball and chain. It becomes resentment-building work.

What about when one spouse courageously commits while confining commitment describes the other spouse? Confining commitment affects our spouse's will and supplies little motivation to work. As long as we ourselves have courageous commitment, we slowly help our spouse increase both the belief in and the will to work on our marriage.

Concentration of Thoughts

According to Dictionary.com, "concentrate" means "to focus one's thoughts." The game *Concentration* involved flipping two cards, trying to make the most matches. We focus on the details of each cards placement. Our moves affect their moves and vice-versa, but we cannot control which cards our opponents will choose to flip. Marital interactions imitate that game.



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Peter began walking on water by focusing on Jesus. He ignored the storm and howling winds. Like Peter, though, we begin to sink when we change our focus from our calling to the crashing waves surrounding us.

Individual marital therapy focuses on what WE can control, namely our own thoughts and behaviors that contribute to the marital problems. In his book *Messed up Men of the Bible*, Dave Samples noted, "After...thirty years of marriage, I've concluded that the only thing I can control is my attitude. Everything else is fantasy...A sure sign of when I'm trying to control things, people, or circumstances is that I get frustrated, develop a bad attitude, and usually end up angry."

Individual marital therapy works when focusing on accountability and self-change because we control only ourselves.

Change of Behavior

Our actions generally begin for good reasons. Yet as the world changed around us, we continued to respond the same way. Our choices, or habits, gradually become dysfunctional. For example, one-year-olds point and babble when they want something. We know a problem exists when a ten-year-old does the same.

We can commit to our marriages, concentrate on our own contributions to the problems, and still not *change*. Peter changed, at least a little. He *lived* because he realized his error, refocused on his solution, and then *did* something. He called out to Jesus.

Change occurs when we practice our therapy information at home, and I do mean *practice*. We practice change much like exercise. Few walk into a gym and bench press 200 pounds the first workout. Complete, consistent change occurs with God's guidance and help on a gradual basis-- unless God intervenes with a miracle.



The Bible gives a multitude of reasons and areas for work (Corinthians 4:12-13, 7:32-24; Galatians 6:9; James 1:2-4). A few of these areas include:

- *Demonstrating love* (1 Corinthians 13:1, 1 Peter 4:8)
- *Practicing forgiveness* (Matthew 18:21-22; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13, 19; 1 Corinthians 13:5)
- *Building good communication* (Proverbs 12:18, 15:1, 18:21; Ephesians 4:15; James 1:19)

Individual marital therapy succeeds because we practice the changes learned: how to love more unconditionally, forgive more fully, and communicate more effectively. And, with God's help, we do these through commitment, concentration, and change.

Warning: After Successful Individual Marital Therapy.

Individual marital therapy's success creates its own issue. When we fail to maintain our self-focus, we can believe our spouses reap the benefits of *our* efforts. If we allow this belief to fester, resentment builds and gains strength.

It takes two to make a marriage work. Remember that in the end, you both had to commit, concentrate, and change to reap the benefits. ■

Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it. Ezra 10:4

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