



Sexual Life Improvement, PLLC

~from the desks of Shelley L. Imholte, Ph.D., LCSW & Michael Kelley, MBA, LMFT

COUPLES GROUP INITIATIVE

Overview of Couples Group Therapy

Group psychotherapy has been around for over 50 years. As a treatment modality, group therapy has proven to be as effective as individual and/or couples therapy and a powerful adjunct to individual and/or couples therapy that promotes growth and learning about the self and the self in relationship with and to others. Each of us has been raised and socialized in group environments such as families, schools, churches, organized activity groups or athletic groups and the reality is that throughout life we will always be a member of both large and small groups. These group environments influence and have influenced our growth and development as human beings as well as our experience in relationships with others. Couples group psychotherapy provides a place where you and your partner come together with other couples, with intention, to share with other couples, to learn from the group experience, to gain a better understanding of who you are in the couple relationship, what you and your partner want and need in life, and the patterns that are present in your couple relationship that limit the two of you from living as fully as possible. Together, couple members learn about their relationships through interactions, witnessing, and exercises with other couples to strengthen connection within their unique couple relationship.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. How does couples group work?

Group facilitators will screen and select couple group members prior to the start of group meetings. Screening is important to ensure that couples are prepared to challenge themselves as individuals and within their couple relationship. Selected couples demonstrate that each individual member of the couple and the couple as a whole is likely

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to experience interpersonal growth by participating in the couple group experience and that both members are strong enough psychologically to accept and give input from and with other couples group members in a conscious effort to achieve personal growth.

The couples group theme is applicable to the reasons couples might have sought couples therapy, for example: to address couple communications, to increase connection and presence, to discuss finances, for support with parenting, to explore retirement and aging changes, to navigate grief and loss, to increase sexual frequency and satisfaction, and to learn how to navigate conflict in healthy productive ways. The *theme of the group* is instrumental in guiding the group and if the theme does not match with the couple's presenting concern the group is unlikely to be a good fit for the couple. As a potential couple group members prepare for a screening process dedicated to discussing their fears and apprehensions of participating in group and if the two of you, as a couple, commit to membership in the group, each couple will set goals for the group experience together with the group facilitators. In this way, couples become learning partners while supporting and challenging one another through interactions within the group.

2. If someone is in couples group therapy, do they also need individual and/or couples therapy?

This is decided mutually between the therapist and the couple members. Each couple is unique and so are their needs, wants, and goals. Couples group therapy has been used as a single treatment approach or as an adjunct therapy to individual and/or couples therapy. If a couple or individual members of a couple are considering participation in couples therapy, a discussion between potential group members and their therapist(s) about what is needed to get the most out of this deeply relational work, both as individuals and as a couple, is encouraged.

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3. How is group therapy different from support groups or self-help groups?

The focus in couples group therapy is on interpersonal relationships (self, other, couple, and community) and assists couples with learning how to express themselves honestly and authentically in their relationship. Couples group therapy also offers a unique network of support for specific problems or challenges that are often sensitive in nature or even viewed as flawed or pathological. Couples group therapy differs from support groups and self-help groups in that couples group therapy does more than offer members new ways to cope with what is happening in their relationship, couples group therapy is designed to promote growth and change with the guidance of licensed professionals. Support groups, often led by trained professionals, help people cope with difficult situations and are usually geared toward alleviating symptoms. Self-help groups are more likely to focus on a particular shared symptom or situation and are not usually led by a professional.

4. Why is couples group therapy useful?

It is normal to be concerned about beginning couples group therapy and to have questions about the effectiveness of couples group therapy. Couples group therapy is useful because the group provides opportunities to learn together with other couples to identify and understand couple dynamics and the effects of ingrained patterns in the couple relationship. We live and interact with others daily and often there are things that other people are experiencing or grappling with that can be beneficial to share with others. In couples group therapy, couples learn that they are neither as alone nor as different than other couples as they might think. The more each couple engages in the couples group therapy process, the more they will gain from group membership.

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5. What kind of commitment do I/we need to make?

There are a number of different structures used in providing group therapy. For example, an ‘open’ group means that members are free to come and go from the group with no commitment to attendance. A ‘closed’ group means that once the group has its members it does not change, new people can neither come in and join the group nor can members of the group just up and leave the group without group discussion and input. The closed group is highly confidential, with group rules defined and a group contract informing each member of their responsibility in and to the group. The time commitment and length of group can vary ranging from a short-term to long-term and meeting weekly or 1-2 times a month. It is important that each couple understand what they are committing to and couples are encouraged to ask questions about the time commitment and duration of group. The biggest and most important commitment you can make is to yourself and your couple relationship.

6. What if I am uncomfortable discussing my problems?

It is common to feel uneasy or anxious when you are first joining a group, as an individual and as a couple. Over time, and with the assistance of the therapist, most couple group members develop interest and trust in each other and the group process. Couples group therapy provides a great deal of relief because it allows couples to discuss with others how they experience similar situations in partnership in a private and highly confidential setting while trying out new ways of interacting in a safe setting that is supportive of personal and relational growth.