

12 Reasons Why Couples Counseling is Not Recommended When Domestic Violence is Present

Working definition of domestic violence: “a pattern of coercive behavior used by one person to control and subordinate another in an intimate relationship. These behaviors may include physical, sexual, psychological, economic abuse.”

1. Because the focus is on the relationship, there is an implicit assumption that each person contributes to the abusive behavior, when in truth the perpetrator is fully and solely responsible for his abusive behavior.
2. By focusing on issues other than the abusive behavior it allows and even encourages the abusive behavior to continue.
3. It increases the danger to the victim of further or escalated abuse due to the interference of the counselor. Because the batterer's goal is to maintain control of the relationship, any interference on the counselor's part may lead to an increase in his controlling behavior. The therapist may unwittingly elicit information or initiate interventions that escalate abuse.
4. It increases blaming the victim. When abusive behavior is identified the victim may be asked “what do you do to cause this?” Alternatively the batterer may use comments and observations of the couples counselor to justify his abusive behavior (e.g., “remember he said how your refusal to answer my questions only makes things worse”). Because many victims already tend to blame themselves, this taking on of undue responsibility may be further encouraged by the counselor.
5. Out of fear of further abuse the victim may not be honest about the abuse or other issues in the couples session, giving the false impression to both the therapist and her partner that things are much better than they are.
6. On the other hand, the victim may have a false sense of security and safety which may lead her to disclose information she normally wouldn't at home, believing that the therapist will keep her safe. Once they have left the safety of the counseling room, he may then retaliate with more severe abuse.
7. If the therapist focuses extensively on the abuse, the batterer may feel shamed and scape-goated, being viewed as the sole problem. In a batterer intervention group all of the members are expected to speak about their abuse but there is no shaming or judging that occurs. While they are held accountable for their abuse they are not blamed for every problem in the relationship. Therefore couples counseling may discourage the level of disclosure that is possible in a group.
8. Abusive behavior tends to distract attention away from other issues involving the relationship, like a smoke screen. When abuse is present, it can be very difficult to focus on any other issues. This is akin to trying to do couples counseling where one or both people are active alcoholics. Until they are sober such interventions have little effectiveness. Similarly, until the abuse has stopped, other interventions may have limited effectiveness.
9. It colludes with the batterer's denial that his abuse is the problem. It allows him to continue to blame her and/or the relationship for his abusive and controlling behavior. He can also take advantage of the couples sessions to further his agenda of control and power over.
10. Often in couples counseling there is no violence assessment completed. What little assessment is done may be completed with both people present, further undermining the possibility of getting any honest disclosure.
11. Because the couples counselor is focused on the relationship s/he may be hesitant to be strongly confrontive with just one of the individuals, concerned that will be viewed as favoritism. Therefore, even if there is an awareness of abuse, it may not be as strongly confronted or as focused on as it needs to be.
12. It can also keep her in the abusive relationship longer than she would otherwise stay in the false hope that the counseling may make things better. Some forms of couples counseling require couples to make a time commitment (e.g., 3-6 months) of not separating while in the counseling which may also keep her in the abusive situation longer than she would if she was not attending counseling.

Oregon Domestic Violence Council

Summary by Chris Huffine of a discussion by the Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network. 9/98