

Thinking about Relationship Counseling

The most difficult thing is another person

~ Buddhist Monk

Your best chance of increasing your happiness is to look at what you can do for yourself. It beats trying to change your partner.

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter

~ Martin Luther King

What can you do for yourself? You can work up the courage to be you. It's a risk, and it requires trust that it's safe to be you – which points to the *two-way street of relationships* – but it's worth it. Being an individual includes getting clear on what you think, feel, want, and need. And working on how you put that out there. How can you stay in integrity with yourself – take responsibility for your *intentions* – *and at the same time* – without taking responsibility for how someone *interprets* your words or actions – hold some *consideration* for your partner's experience. That's the dance.

The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes

~ Marcel Proust

While our needs matter, sometimes our very experience around our needs has less to do with something going on *outside* of us than with an *internal* process – how our experience is shaped by our thoughts, our expectations, and the meaning we make of others' actions. Remember, there are always two sides to a story. And there's more of a chance we can have a hand in our experience when we look at what *we* bring to it. When we focus on the outside, it's easy to slip into blame. We might have a choice: We can see ourselves as victims or we can take some responsibility for our experience. How much can we cultivate gratitude and the capacity to give and receive love?

You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf

~ Swami on a surfboard, appearing on a poster in India

How else can you work on your end of being an individual? By understanding, allowing, and supporting your partner to be an individual, too. This is where a lot of people start to feel shaky, but I don't see a way around this, because that's reality, in that we *are* bound to be different in some ways, and we can't always be in the same place at the same time. This means keeping a solid sense of ourselves in the face of what our partner might think, say or do. And it also means keeping our calm. So we have to remember not to take things personally, to *listen to ourselves* rather than trying to get our partner to listen to us, and to remember to breathe.

Remember: If you are triggered or struggling, it's probably just because your partner is struggling, too. Remembering this might help you step out of emotional reactivity and have some compassion. It will help re-connect you. Some caring and consideration amidst it all will go a long way. For example, you can get hung up on things like dishes in the sink, but when there is simply caring for the struggle around it, you might find that these "seemingly important" needs no longer seem to matter so much. A relationship might have some essentials for you, like safety and some sort of connection (e.g., "*Will you be present with me?*"), but you might find that if you change the tone of how you are with each other, you might go a long way towards creating happiness together.

It's tempting to think that couples therapy is about communication skills.

~ But maybe it's really about something else.