

Help! My Spouse Won't Get Help With Me

What to do when we want therapy and our spouse doesn't



“We need to talk.”

“Oh no, here we go.”

“I think we need to go to couple’s therapy.”

“Absolutely not.”

Now what?

Deciding to go to therapy can be a difficult choice to begin with, but when we feel therapy as a couple is either crucial or beneficial to our marriage and our spouse is uninterested at best and adamant at worst about not going, we can feel helpless and overwhelmed.

Respect

Before we decide on the best course of action to deal with this disparity it is important to respect our spouse’s right to his or her own preference. Just like we each have very unique reasons for wanting therapy, our spouses can have equally unique reasons for not partaking in counseling. And for each person, we are often not fully aware of all the reasons behind our preferences.

Some of the reasons I find in my practice that a person declines treatment include a fear of vulnerability, fear of the unknown, distrust in authority figures, prior negative therapy experiences, feeling like the relationship cannot be helped, or misconceptions about therapy (such as thinking that the therapist will side with one person, tell the couple to stay married or get divorced, blame one person, or give advice). In rare cases, the reason a person refuses help is because of an abusive dynamic going on in the marriage. It is not our job to address each of these fears alone but understanding that there can be many reasons spouses have for not joining us in therapy can take the sting out of their decision.

Breathe, Listen, & Share

When we take a deep breath and remind ourselves of our spouse's rights to his or her own preference, we can then approach our spouses from a more curious and calm angle to better understand their position. We can respond to our spouse's adamance by saying "going to therapy is something that is important to me, but I get how you can have reservations about going. Can you share with me what specifically is unappealing about therapy?"

Relationships with Mental Illness &/or Abuse

If the relationship is abusive, our children are negatively influenced by our spouses, or our partner has a mental illness, the strategies suggested here would differ in that it would be smoother if we go to therapy on our own first to figure out how to move forward based on the specific issues. Some of the tools we would individually learn in session that can positively impact these kinds of dynamics include learning to implement boundaries, self-care, individuation, and in more extreme cases, following a domestic abuse treatment protocol.

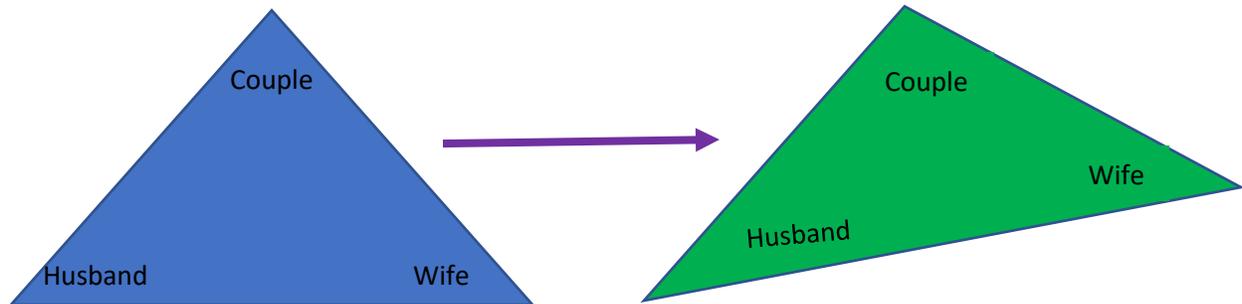
Validate

In a non-abusive, healthier relationship, our spouses should be able to share their opinion. We can demonstrate understanding for their opinion by thanking them for telling us how they feel and then by validating (not agreeing) with what they just shared, saying "based on what you're saying, I can see from your perspective why you wouldn't want to go." We can then ask them, "this is very important to me, what do you think we should do about this difference in opinion?"

One Person Can Make A Difference

If at the end of the day, our spouses do not want to go to therapy, the best action we can take is to go to therapy on our own. I believe that a couple can greatly improve their relationship, though not wholly, even when only one partner participates in treatment. I use the analogy of three points of a triangle. Marriage is made up of three entities, each of which needs nurturing and attention: the husband, the wife, and the relationship. The wife represents one point, the husband represents the other, and the coupleship is the third point of a triangle. Even if two of the three points (say, the

husband and the coupleship) stay in the exact same spots, and the wife's point moves just slightly to the right, the entire triangle changes and becomes mathematically a different triangle with different angles. Thus, even if a partner doesn't shift their perspective and actions, the entire feeling and dynamic of the relationship can change if the other partner shifts.



In treatment, a therapist can provide psychoeducation and teach tools to better communicate in a marriage as well as navigate differences. The therapist can also help the client learn to address and speak to their partner's fears about therapy. I have seen cases overtime where one spouse improves tremendously on their own in therapy and their partner ultimately decides to join in on the fun and partake in therapy. Even if our spouses never get the help we feel they need, therapy can help support us when we experience frustration and loneliness from their decision as well as teach us how to cope and live some of the unhealthy dynamics. The bottom line is that when we grow and transform ourselves, we relate to others in a healthier way. When we take ownership of our own happiness, fulfillment, and development, the only outcome is positive.