

One More Try—Counseling

by BJ Mann

When clients arrive at my office, they are rarely on the same page. There is always one person more psychologically ready to end the marriage than the other. During our conversation, I may learn that they have either been to counseling or one has begged the other “for years” to go. Now, when reality sets in, one or both, may want to reconsider counseling.

Couples are often surprised at how supportive I am of counseling. I encourage them to try counseling but consider several important suggestions:

1. A set number of visits

Commit to go a certain number of times, usually 4-6, but a finite amount of sessions where both must show-up, regardless how they feel. This frees them to be honest and limits the indecision. When all sessions have been completed, they decide whether to commit to another number of sessions or return to mediation. The key is both will have learned important things about themselves, the other, and their marriage.

2. A softer landing

Another reason counseling is so useful is that the one who wants the marriage will not retain the illusion everything would have worked out if only they had gone to counseling. If the counseling confirms that the marriage is over, the couple knows they did all they could (at least at the end). They honored the request of the one partner to try and ultimately the need of the other to move forward with ending the marriage.

3. Help the counselor

Be up front with the counselor about the number of sessions they expect and that they want to focus on partnership qualities. Often counseling may digress into some of the family issues, kids, money etc. The agreed-upon sessions are a valuable opportunity for each person to examine what each really want in a partner for a long-term relationship or marriage.

4. Focus on Partnership Qualities

Write a list of at least 25 desired qualities in a partner, each one having at least 3 sentences so they can explore what they mean. Decide which ones are most important. Discuss these with each other with the counselor’s guidance.

This exercise may clarify their needs and develop a clearer picture of whether the partner can truly meet them. For example, couples often use words like trust and respect. However, they are not sure how those are expressed in behaviors.

Such lists can also help the couple articulate why the marriage is ending, what has changed, and what the feelings are now.

These simple steps can help reduce long-term conflict, build mutual respect, and set the stage for future interactions through the divorce process and afterwards, especially if there are children involved.