



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, and economic abuse”—Oregon Domestic Violence Council

1. Focusing on the relationship assumes that each person contributes to the abusive behavior, when in truth the perpetrator is fully and solely responsible for his abusive behavior.
2. Focusing on issues other than the abusive behavior allows the abusive behavior to continue.
3. Danger to the victim may increase due to the counselor’s involvement in the relationship. 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. Blaming the victim. When abusive behavior is identified, the victim may be asked “what was your part in 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”). Many victims already tend to blame themselves; the counselor may unwittingly encourage this.
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 that things are better than they really are.
6. On the other hand, the victim may have a false sense of security and safety in the couples session. This 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 abuse.
7. In couples counseling, if the therapist focuses extensively on the abuse, the batterer may feel shamed, scape-goated, and to blame for every problem in the relationship. In a batterer intervention group while he is held accountable for his abuse he is not blamed for every problem in the relationship. Couples counseling may discourage the level of disclosure that is possible in a group.

8. Before other issues in the relationship can be effectively addressed the abusive behavior must end. Abusive behavior tends to distract attention away from other issues, like a smoke screen. This is akin to couples counseling where one or both parties are active alcoholics; until they are sober such interventions have little effectiveness. Similarly, until the abuse has stopped, other interventions have limited effectiveness.
9. It colludes with the batterer's denial. It allows him to continue to blame her and/or the relationship for his abusive and controlling behavior. He can then take advantage of the couples sessions to further his agenda of control and power over.
10. Often in couples counseling there is no assessment for violence. If an assessment is done with both people present, the potential for honest disclosure will be undermined.
11. A couples counselor who is focused on the relationship may be hesitant to strongly confront just one of the individuals, concerned this will be viewed as favoritism. Such failure to directly confront abuse contributes to minimization and denial.
12. Couples counseling can keep a victim 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 prolong an abusive relationship.

Summary by Chris Huffine, Psy.D. of a discussion by the Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network.

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