



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 and controlling behavior, when in truth the abusive partner is fully and solely responsible for their abusive and controlling behavior.
2. Focusing on issues other than the abusive and controlling behavior allows that behavior to continue.
3. Danger to the abused partner may increase due to the therapist’s involvement in the relationship. Because the abusive partner’s goal is to maintain control of the relationship, any interference on the therapist’s part may lead to an increase in their abusive and controlling behavior. The therapist may unwittingly elicit information or initiate interventions that escalate abuse and control.
4. Blaming the abused partner. When abusive and controlling behavior is identified, the abused partner may be asked “what was your part in this?” Alternatively, the abusive partner may use comments and observations of the therapist to justify their abusive and controlling behavior (e.g., “remember they said how your refusal to answer my questions only makes things worse”). Many abused partners already tend to blame themselves; the therapist may unwittingly encourage this.
5. Out of fear of further abuse, the abused partner may not be honest about the abuse and control 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 abused partner may have a false sense of security and safety in the couples session. This may lead to disclosure of information that would normally be withheld, believing that the therapist will keep them safe. Once they have left the safety of the counseling room, the abusive partner may then retaliate with more abuse and control.
7. In couples counseling, if the therapist focuses extensively on the abuse and control, the abusive partner may feel targeted, shamed, scapegoated, and to blame for every problem in the relationship. In an abuse intervention group, while they are held accountable for their abuse they are 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 and controlling behavior must end. Abusive and controlling 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 abusive partner's denial. It allows them to continue to blame the abused partner and/or the relationship for their abusive and controlling behavior. They can then take advantage of the couples sessions to further their agenda of control and power over.
10. Often in couples counseling there is no competent assessment for domestic violence. This should typically involve interviewing each person alone, privately, to assure honest disclosure and allow for greater safety. If an assessment is done with both people present, the potential for honest disclosure and safety 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 and control contributes to minimization and denial.
12. Couples counseling can keep an abused partner in the abusive relationship longer than they 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.