

An Agenda Couples Can Use For Weekly Relationship-Building Meetings

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Abstract

Weekly meetings outside of conjoint therapy can help couples learn to monitor the status of their relationship as well as to internalize the psychotherapeutic process. A problem arises when couples find themselves not knowing what would be most helpful to talk about. A checklist is provided which couples can use as their agenda to structure such meetings.

BACKGROUND

It is a common practice for therapists working with couples to encourage their clients to meet on a formal basis outside of therapy. These meetings can serve multiple purposes. Most frequently, they are used to extend a couple's focus on specific treatment issues beyond the one hour per week they meet with their therapists. For example, a couple that has had a difficult time expressing anger, except in pent up, explosive rages, might be asked to meet every Sunday evening to discuss all the "minor" things that happened during the week that made them angry.

Such sessions not only facilitate a couple to work towards a common objective, they also demonstrate to the couple that they are capable of learning without the immediate presence of a mental health professional. This is a critical lesson for clients to learn if they are to leave therapy with a set of skills which they feel are theirs, not the therapist's.

Assigning couples the "homework" of meeting weekly, using a formal agenda, is a method I have found that works well to create a skill that a couple can rely on to keep their relationship on track once they have left treatment. For couples leaving therapy without such a skill set, there are often problems. They leave treatment feeling that their relationship is back on track, but find that over the next six to twelve months that they have drifted back to old, maladaptive patterns of communication.

Until recently, it has taken the couples I have worked with longer than I would have expected to learn how to conduct home meetings that both they and I would agree were productive. What I eventually came to realize is that I had assumed a higher level of psychological-mindedness with my clients than was the case. Couples often did not know how to go about structuring a conversation with each other that lead them to cover all the issues that need to be addressed.

This isn't to say that the quality of communication rests entirely with the contents of communication. Clearly process is equally, if not more, important. Couples come to seek professional help precisely because the process of their communication is dysfunctional in some way. However, to correct process problems, couples need to learn how to monitor the status of their relationship. This monitoring activity can be aided significantly if a couple is given guidance that enables them to successfully structure this monitoring activity. Even excellent mechanics use a formal checklist when they perform a regular service on a car. It isn't that they do not know the basics of car repair; they just know from their experience that the checklist allows them to focus on the specific tasks that need to be done without getting distracted with the additional task of remembering or creating a new protocol each time they perform a maintenance service.

APPLICATION

Below, you will find the agenda that I give to couples who are ready to lead their own regular weekly meetings outside of treatment. I only assign

such homework when I can see for myself that a couple is capable of communicating in a way that is constructive. I have rarely given couples this list before I have seen them four times. Sometimes it may be six months before a couple is ready to attempt any form of self-monitoring. I only give couples this list to use at home after they have conducted a successful "practice" meeting using this list in my office.

This is what I tell my clients at the time of their first home-meeting assignment:

When you meet each week outside of our sessions, it is helpful to have a formal agenda to follow. I have found from my work with many couples that this list of discussion topics pretty much covers the gamut of issues that couples find helpful to talk about. Not all of these topics will be relevant for you at any one time and some of them may never be important for you to discuss. However, just consider each item each time you meet. If you have something to say about it, fine. If you don't, just go on to the next item. You may want to add new items to the list. Great. Be creative. Just let me know about each topic you add and what you said to each other when you first added it.

Set a time limit for your meetings. Do not meet for more than an hour. If either of you feel that the meeting is becoming destructive

rather than constructive, end the meeting. Either try again the next day, if you think you have figured out what went wrong and you have a good idea how to correct the problem, or wait to continue your discussions until we next meet.

A few additional points to note about this list. First, I do not see any reason why this list would be any less useful for gay or lesbian couples than it would be for heterosexual couples. Second, issues related specifically to children have been intentionally omitted. Many couples obviously don't have children, but more importantly, a checklist for structuring a productive discussion about children warrants a separate article and a separate list. Feel free to copy and edit this list to suit your therapeutic style and the needs of your clients.

THE AGENDA

Instructions:

Each partner take a turn describing:

1. The times during the week that I felt you really understood what I was saying or feeling.
2. The times during the week you misread what I was saying or feeling.
3. The times you said something, but if you had used a different tone or words, I might have understand your point of view.
4. The things you did or said that I liked and appreciated.

5. The things you did or said (or didn't do or didn't say) that hurt my feelings.
6. The "hot button(s)" you pressed that put me on the defensive.
7. The things that happened during the week that made me angry and still bother me.
8. The things I wish I had not said or done.
9. The times during the week we kept agreements.
10. The times during the week we did not keep agreements.
11. The times during the week we did (or did not) perform the household tasks we had committed to do.
12. The times during the week one of us said one thing, but non-verbal communication said something different.
13. The specific behaviors I wish you would change.
14. The times during the week I wish I could have been with you.
15. The times during week I wish I could have been alone.
16. The times during the week I felt safe and secure with you.
17. The times during the week I felt afraid while I was with you.
18. The times during the week I felt I could (could not) trust you.
19. The times during the week I felt taken care of by you.
20. Our lives outside of our relationship:
 - a. Did we give consideration to each other's personal and work needs?
 - b. Did outside demands unnecessarily intrude upon our relationship?

21. The things I'd like to negotiate.
- Instructions:
- a. Create a list.
 - b. Negotiate each item
 - c. Write down each agreement
22. The times during the week we should have talked and didn't. (The things we still need to talk about.)
23. Our sex life:
- a. How I feel about the sex we had this week.
 - b. What would make sex more enjoyable for me.
24. The times during the week that money was a source of conflict, but I didn't say anything or thought we did not reach a satisfactory resolution.

Next steps:

- a. Decide who will be responsible for making the next meeting happen.
- b. Schedule the time and place of next meeting

DISCUSSION

Couples will not be immediately successful in leading their own meetings. Success requires regular practice as well as coaching from the therapist. Crucial to this process is the therapist's encouragement of the couple to learn to modify the list of agenda items so that it better fits their particular needs. This process not only produces a better list for the couple using it, it creates ownership. A couple will only use a *therapist's* list for a short

time. They will use their *own* list over the long term. In addition, in modifying the list to make it their own, the couple will have the experience that they can collectively fashion solutions to their own problems without necessarily having a professional sitting in the room with them. It is precisely this experience of competence that is crucial to a couple leaving treatment with a tangible, long-lasting gain.

References

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