

What If the Problem in Your Relationship Isn't Your Partner?

A Guide to Understanding Couples Therapy

A recent essay in *The New York Times* described a husband who went into couples therapy convinced that his wife was the problem. By the end of the process, he realized something disorienting and surprisingly hopeful: The problem wasn't just her. It was him, too.

Not because he was 'bad,' broken, or to blame—but because he finally saw how his own protective habits, defenses, and old survival strategies were quietly shaping the marriage. I see this moment all the time in my couples therapy practice, and it's often where real change begins.

Most Couples Arrive with a Case to Prove

When partners first walk into my office, they're usually exhausted and frustrated. Each person has a well-rehearsed story about what the other is doing wrong.

"If she weren't so emotional..."

"If he would just listen..."

"If they would change, we'd be fine."

This makes sense. When we feel hurt or lonely, our nervous system looks outward for the threat. But here's the hard truth: **Blame feels powerful, but it keeps you stuck.**

The Shift That Changes Everything

The turning point in therapy comes when each person begins to ask a different question:

Not *"How do I get you to change?"*

But *"How am I contributing to this pattern?"*

This isn't about shame or self-criticism. It's about self-empowerment—because the moment you see your part, you gain the power to do something different. That's where my work begins.

What Couples Therapy Looks Like with Me

My approach, grounded in **Relational Life Therapy**, is active and experiential. We don't just talk about the past while the same fights keep happening at home. We work directly with what's happening between you, right there in the room.

That often looks like:

- Slowing down a conflict and unpacking what each person is actually feeling underneath the anger
- Identifying protective roles like shutting down, controlling, over-functioning, or collapsing
- Learning how to speak directly and honestly without attacking or disappearing
- Practicing new conversations in session so you leave with lived experience, not just insight
- Building accountability without blame
- Strengthening both self-protection and connection at the same time

Sometimes I'm warm and gently guiding. Sometimes I'm direct and interrupting a pattern in real time. Clients often say it feels both compassionate and bracingly honest. Lasting change usually requires both.

The Paradox Couples Discover

Here's what surprises many people: When you stop focusing on fixing your partner and start working on your own growth, the relationship often improves faster.

When you speak your truth while thinking about how your tone, words, and attitude will land with the other person, your partner listens more. When you set a boundary kindly, resentment drops. When you take responsibility, defensiveness softens on both sides.

Your partner may still have work to do—most do—but you don't have to wait for them to start.

Therapy Is Not About Deciding Who's Right

It's about building two adults who can:

- Stay present during conflict
- Tolerate differences
- Repair after ruptures
- Ask directly for what they need
- Offer care without losing themselves
- Take good care of themselves even when the other is frustrating or disappointing

In other words, two people who can be **connected and self-protected at the same time**. That's what creates fierce intimacy.

If You Recognize Yourself Here

If you're tired of the same arguments, the same distance, or the same lonely feeling of talking past each other, therapy can help. Not by teaching you who's right, but by helping each of you become more skillful, honest, and relational.

The *New York Times* writer described realizing, with some humility, that he was 'the problem.' I'd say it a little differently: In every struggling relationship, both partners are part of the problem, and that means **both partners can become part of the solution**.

If you're ready to do that work, I'd be glad to talk with you.

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This resource was inspired by an essay in The New York Times about personal accountability in marriage, which echoes what I see daily in my couples therapy practice.