

When Valentine's Day Isn't What It Used To Be **by Steve Danzig, LMSW-CC, CCS, LADC**

How do couples know when they need professional counseling to help their relationship? Hopefully one of them will realize it and encourage the other to go to counseling together. But more often couples think that they can handle any difficulties in their relationship themselves. Many think that their difficulties are just a rough patch or that there are temporary valid reasons for their loss of closeness. And sometimes they are just that. But when a rough patch drags on too long, it provides a fertile landscape for those couples to start growing apart. Unfortunately, there is no definition for "too long" - it can be different for each person in the relationship.

Part of the problem for the delay in seeking therapy is that a romantic couple shares a unique level of intimacy with one another. Consequently, there is a tendency to assume that you know what your partner is thinking. Unfortunately, you might be wrong. Another problem is that couples tend to gauge the success or failure of their relationship by comparing it to others in their social circle. The problem with that is no one truly knows the complexity of someone else's relationship except the people within that relationship. Similarly, everyone has a different boiling point where they say enough is enough and walk away. Your friends may accept things about their partners that you may not know about and could not live with. A more recent cultural problem is that many couples have skipped the friendship phase of a relationship because they have fallen in love so fast. When the love is in trouble you have to rely on your friendship with that person to sustain the relationship. If there is no friendship it's the same as no net under a high wire act. They might not fall, but if they do...it's over.

For all of these reasons it is important to be aware that separation starts long before an actual break-up and is typically ignored as a rough patch. Most research on couple's separation indicates that the couples had been in trouble for at least months if not years before they realized that they couldn't handle the problem by themselves. At this point it can often be too late. Before actually starting therapy, one or both of the people have already made up their mind and were simply seeking professional counseling for permission to end their relationship. How frustrating for everyone! Especially since couples counseling can be very successful when couples notice a "rough patch" in their relationship and commit to getting help to work through it. When that happens, the therapist can help the couple understand each other's feelings, resolve conflicts, and improve their relationship. The therapist can give the couple the tools to communicate better, negotiate differences, problem solve, and even argue in a healthier way. This process allows each person in the relationship to be heard, to feel important, and ultimately be reminded that they are loved by their partner. A couples counselor can also help couples that may have skipped the friendship phase start over (within the relationship) to build a solid friendship that can weather the ups and downs inherent in a romantic relationship.

Couples counseling is a good investment for a healthy, loving relationship. Counseling doesn't necessarily last that long but the benefits definitely do. Even though you typically find a couples counselor under "marriage and family counselors" in the yellow pages, many couples counselors work with dating, engaged, cohabitating, and married couples. Simply ask the therapist about their practice when you call to inquire about couples counseling for you and your loved one.

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