

3.8 Relationship Therapy

Explore interpersonal dynamics in therapy.

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There are several contexts in which therapy involving more than one person can be beneficial. The most common is couples therapy, which focuses on the dynamics between a couple and requires the participation of both partners. We depend on our attachments to others for our emotional and other needs, and when they malfunction, it can cause us great pain. Couples therapy can be an opportunity to heal wounds sustained in current or previous relationships.

In family therapy, all or most family members attend therapy together. This form of therapy is relatively rare since it requires significant investments of time and energy. However, it can be quite fruitful. As children, our psyche is forged in our families of origin, and confronting that dynamic in a safe space can unravel traumatic responses and bring profound healing.

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- Acting out relationship dynamics in a clinical setting can reveal truths that are easy to hide in solo therapy and offer opportunities to work on them directly.
- Provides a rare chance to improve your significant relationships.
- Benefits extend beyond the couple—e.g., children do better in school when Mom and Dad aren't fighting.

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- Other participants must agree to attend therapy without coercion.
- Many people resist examining the dynamics of their relationships closely for fear of what they might discover.

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Similar to Tool 3.1: Go to Therapy, it's important to do your research so you can find a therapist with whom both you and your spouse or family resonate. As in one-to-one therapy, there are many different styles of couples and family therapy. You may need to experiment with more than one therapist and explore different disciplines until you find one with whom you're aligned.

In most cases, family or spousal therapy is initiated by a specific event. It could be a significant conflict—such as one partner having an affair—or a close family member passing away. Whatever the reason, everyone involved must be willing to recognize the need to explore relationship dynamics that have previously remained unspoken. This can be tricky, as many people resist looking closely at themselves.

Be advised that starting relationship therapy may initially feel more painful than continuing with things as they are as hidden layers of emotion rise to the surface and repressed conflicts are expressed. This is part of the process, and a skilled therapist will know how to navigate these turbulent waters and guide the participants toward safety.

The goal of the therapist in these settings is not to solidify relationships, save marriages, or create a loving family. Instead, their objective is to enable people to fully express themselves and understand each other so they can work together more harmoniously—or, if need be, break apart and walk separate paths. To do this, many will split people into subgroups, such as parents and children. To create a safe space in these situations, they will maintain separate confidentiality agreements for each subgroup.

The duration of the work depends on the complexity of the challenges you want to work through. It usually takes more than one session, but it doesn't always continue indefinitely, as personal therapy may. As a guide, you should continue the therapy sessions as long as you feel that the energy in the room is strong and that you're doing important work. When that sensation is no longer present, it's possible you may have reached the end of the usefulness of the therapy, at least for now. Or you may have simply gone as far as you can with a particular therapist and need to engage a new one.
