

How couple counselling works

I see couples with many different kinds of problems, so the following is a broad-brush kind of generalisation. *It may not apply to your situation*. Nevertheless, I think it could be helpful for people to have some idea how this process can work. This page is about work with a couple. I also often see individuals about relationship problems, but that is a different process.

- My job is not to solve your practical problems: job problems, medical problems, legal problems, money problems, which school to choose or where to go on holiday. If you disagree about something like how tidy the house needs to be kept, or how often to have sex, it is not my job to give you the “correct answer”. What I am concerned with is getting you to a point where you can talk to each other about it in a reasonable way, without it getting off track, blowing up, or shutting down.
- We do this by looking closely at the patterns of how you react to each other. Sometimes we will talk about a disagreement you have had, but the idea is not just to settle that one disagreement, it is to see what it has in common with other disagreements or other areas of your life; what the pattern is.
- As you try to change these patterns, it will sometimes be uncomfortable for you. You need to learn new habits. This may seem difficult at first. It will take work. You will need to take responsibility for behaving differently.
- It’s important not to assume that the problem is just with your partner. If you are assuming that *they* are the one that needs to be changed, or that they are your opponent, then you are not going to get anywhere. It is better to assume that they have reasons for what they do, that they are not just “being difficult”, and that both of you need to learn some new habits. Your easiest (or only) way to fix your problems is to change yourself, and see how your partner responds.
- One useful thing you can do in sessions is to talk openly about how you feel about things, and equally, to listen to your partner without going “yes but”. I will be trying to support this happening. You will be trying to figure out what your partner *really* wants, and why, so that you can understand them. I can help with this.
- An effect of this is often that sessions are tiring, or stressful, and things may seem at first to get worse before they get better. It’s a bit like some kind of coaching in sports, exercise, or diet: you may feel awkward at first, and you should expect this.
- What **doesn’t** work is trying to deal with your partner’s feelings by trying to *manage* them: calming them down, cheering them up, persuading them of something, getting through to them, or blocking them out. I can demonstrate what to do instead. Nobody likes having their feelings managed by someone else.
- In sessions, we can talk about whatever you want, but I will always be trying to encourage you to talk *to each other*, and I will be trying to point out things about *how you talk to each other* and what assumptions you may be making.
- What NOT to do is to use things from the sessions *against* your partner. Never say to them, “you’re doing that thing again that Mike told you not to do”. Concentrate on trying to hear what your partner is saying, and on changing yourself.