



When is Joint Marital Counseling Contra-Indicated? Leslie Vernick

We like to think when working with couples or individuals in distressed marriages that when possible, joint counseling is always the best option. We know it takes two to tango and therefore we want both parties to be present in order to understand the dynamics of the relationship as well as work toward a godly solution. However, let me give you three situations when couples counseling is not helpful and can even be harmful.

1. **When the wife (or husband) is afraid to speak or afraid to be honest.** In joint marital counseling, a counselor likes to hear both the husband and wife's perspectives on how they see their problem. Carol knew she couldn't speak honestly or tell her counselor what was really happening at home. If she dared, she knew she was in for a terrifying drive home or worse. Once, she courageously spoke up and said "that's not true" hoping her counselor would believe her but her husband quickly contradicted her story and the counselor concluded their session by saying, "You both have very different versions of reality. I'm not sure who I can believe."

Carol knew right then that she'd never be able to speak honestly, nor did she have confidence she'd even be heard. For the rest of their counseling she passively allowed her husband and counselor to control the entire flow of the session. She went along like she always did, trying harder to be a better wife, working on her issues, but nothing changed in their marriage.

If there has been any history of abuse, or you notice that one person attempts to control the session with his version of truth but neglects to invite his spouse to share her feelings, rethink your strategy for joint counseling. You can't do effective marriage counseling if one person can't speak freely or is afraid, she has a price to pay when she does.

- 2. When only one person owns the problem or takes responsibility for the breakdown and repair of the relationship.** Carol did want a better marriage. That's why she begged Stan to go to counseling in the first place. She knew Stan was often angry and unhappy with her and she never quite knew what would set him off or what she needed to change.

Stan said he wanted a better marriage too, but from his perspective, the problem was always Carol. If only she would do _____, things would be better. Or if she wouldn't do _____, then he wouldn't get so mad. But Stan failed to realize that the marriage would only be better for Stan, not Carol. Stan never saw anything he did that hurt Carol or acknowledged any changes he needed to make in order to repair their relationship. In fact, Carol rarely spoke about what bothered her (see reason #1).

In these situations, it's tempting to start counseling with the willing client who is able to see her sin and take responsibility, hoping that will encourage her husband to do likewise. In destructive marriages that doesn't happen. When this approach becomes the crux of the counseling, it's harmful to Carol, to Stan, and to their marriage.

First, it gives Carol false hope that if only she tries harder, she somehow can change her husband and he'll stop treating her sinfully and begin to love her as she longs to be loved. Second, it leaves Stan with the impression that the counselor agrees with him that his wife is the problem and she needs to be fixed. It also colludes with his belief that he's entitled to a fantasy wife who never upsets him, disappoints him, or fails to meet his needs and that's what God expects of her, too. Third, it allows Stan to excuse and justify his sinful responses to his marital disappointment or unhappiness as Carol's fault.

Instead of working with willing Carol, turn to Stan and ask him what he thinks he needs to work on to make this marriage better for Carol. If he comes up with something – start there. See if he's willing to engage as a client because unless he does, we cannot do joint marital work nor should we. That leads to my final reason not to do joint marriage counseling.

- 3. When one spouse does not become an official client even though he/she is present.** When an abusive/destructive person goes to joint marital counseling it's usually because he was pressured to do so by his spouse, by a pastor, or by painful consequences. He goes reluctantly, not with the idea of working on anything for himself, but to blame his spouse, and get the counselor to see what a great guy he is and how wrong or crazy his wife is.

Although he probably won't directly admit to this, he is there not to work on himself or their marriage but rather to observe what his wife is telling the counselor, clarify any "untruths" she says about him and to make sure she gets the help she needs to become the woman he wants.

The error we make as counselors when these kinds of cases present themselves is we try to establish a relationship with the person who isn't a willing client. In doing so, we hope that we can bring them to a place where they'll trust us and want to work with us. So we talk about life, work, sports, good restaurants, church and work with the client (his wife) and pretend that this is joint marital counseling when it is not.

Intuitively we know we can't officially counsel him because we know he has not invited us to speak honestly into his life or to give him truthful feedback into what we "see" going on. So without taking sides, we're taking sides. We're afraid if we speak honestly, he'll stop coming (which is probably true). But by not speaking honestly, we are not staying neutral. By our silence, we're empowering the bully at home to believe his actions are not that bad and we think he's a pretty fine person and his wife is making a big deal out of nothing.

To break this pattern, be bold and invite the non-client to be a client. Ask, "Why are you here?" or "What would you like to get for yourself out of counseling?" or "What do you think you need to work on?" This clarifies why you are meeting together. If he can't come up with something he's willing to work on, dismiss him from counseling. You do him no favors to collude that it is his wife's problem to fix this marriage. Yes, you can still work with his wife on her goals if she wants to continue, just don't do it in front of him and call it marriage counseling,

As I say in my new book *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage*, "When there is no safety and no sanity joint counseling is ineffective and often dangerous. If a destructive partner can't see his part or take responsibility for his own wrong thinking, beliefs or attitudes, everything ends up being the wife's fault and her responsibility.

Their old history keeps repeating itself, even in the counselor's office which leaves a wife feeling hopeless that her spouse can change and hopeless that their counselor truly understands their problem.