

# too Little too Late?



Is it too late for couples **counseling?**

A **commitment to growth** predicts the outcome

Commitment is key because without it, there is no couple. Empathy is critical because it allows us to truly understand ourselves, our past and our partner, and his or her history. If we no longer care about hurting each other, there is no motivation to stop doing it. Empathy fuels forgiveness and enables the growth of the individual and the couple.

Undertaking the work of couples counseling is challenging. In many cases, the situation can seem worse before it settles or improves. Again, this does not get easier with time as many partners become polarized. They are very critical of each other and the relationship after years of struggling. No matter how long the problems have existed, it is usually challenging to express and listen to difficult emotions and to alter our behaviors accordingly. There are many examples of couples that go through the work and discover that one or both members no longer want to be together. It is still beneficial for these couples to seek help. If they are childless, they will leave with a better understanding of themselves. If they have children, they will know each other more deeply which will serve them as they continue to raise the children in separate homes.

Committed healthy couples accept the fact that a long-term relationship will inevitably undergo challenges, and they strive to address these issues. As a reward, they create a deeper bond and a stronger commitment to aid them in the next challenge. These couples notice when the relationship is threatened and act. Couples get into trouble when they avoid complex and unavoidable challenges and allow the relationship to die a slow death. | M |

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➤ **MANY BELIEVE THAT** couples therapy is the sole indicator that a relationship is about to die. Anecdotal evidence may support this idea as many divorced couples have sought counseling as a last resort prior to the end. The fact is that most couples arrive at the therapist's door several years too late to save their relationship. This is not to say that these relationships are doomed though the odds do not improve with time.

A wonderful analogy for a relationship is a plant. If you care for a plant and nurture its growth, the plant will thrive. If you starve it of water and sunshine, it will wither and eventually die. If you starve a relationship of love and intimacy, it will eventually cease to exist.

The sad reality for the couple in crisis is that they are likely to repeat the same destructive patterns with their next partner. The divorce rate for first time marriages is about 40%. This climbs to 60% for second marriages and to over 70% for third marriages. If we considered ourselves doomed to

repeat our failed relationships, it is likely we would not subject ourselves to the pain and expense of parting without a committed effort to save the original relationship.

All of us bring emotional baggage into a partnership. Theorists believe the majority of couples bring an equal amount though each can look quite different. One may lose his or her cool easily and another may shut down too readily. The result is a communication breakdown that often results in frequent and repetitive arguments. These disagreements can persist for years until the intimacy and empathy are gone. Much like the starved plant, the relationship is doomed. Adding more time only leads to emotional divorce and then actual divorce, affairs, or separate beds.

No matter how bad things look, committed couples can grow again. By learning about themselves and understanding each other's emotional needs and communication styles, couples can rebuild trust and empathy.