

Marriage Counseling with Only One Spouse



by AARON SIRONI AND LAUREN WHITMAN —

Counselors and pastors often face the reality that it is not always possible to work on a marriage with both spouses present. This leaves them with the question: Can I really help a marriage with access to only one spouse? Among marriage counselors, this question sparks vigorous debate. Many counselors insist on both spouses being present and even refuse to counsel an individual if the main issues are marital. But the everyday reality is that a significant proportion of marriage counseling (formal and informal) takes place in individual conversations.

Because this is so, it's critical to grow in an awareness of the challenges of working with just one spouse. Though we may have good motives, working with only one spouse may heighten conflict and even contribute to the erosion of the marriage. Instead of spurring the individual toward greater love for God and for the spouse, our counsel may lead to greater estrangement in the marriage. In our counseling ministries and in working with church leaders, we have seen this happen time after time. It is never a helper's intent, of course, but it is so easy to slip into a manner of relating to the attending spouse that, in the end, proves detrimental to the couple's

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marriage. Therefore, it is vitally important to consider how to help facilitate bona fide growth in a marriage despite the limitations of only one spouse being present.

Let us tip our hand from the start. We have done successful marriage counseling working with only one spouse, and we still do it. Comparing marriage to dancing helps capture why we do: when two people are dancing poorly, if just one of them works to become a better dancer, then it has a profound impact on the overall quality of the dance. Similarly, in marriage, if just one person makes changes that honor Christ and the spouse, these changes *can* be powerful to transform the way the couple relates to one another.

And so, because spouses do often come alone for counseling concerning their marriage, this article will prepare counselors for this reality. We will identify the potential pitfalls to avoid and then chart a course for working with one spouse. As we move into the article, two overarching biblical principles will guide our discussion and recommendations. The first is the call for spouses (indeed, all Christians) to image Christ by their humble, self-giving love. The defining understanding of our lives is Christ and him crucified, and our aim for Christian marriages is to increasingly reflect the beauty that we see in the Son and how he loved us (Eph 5:22–33). Worthy counseling goals start and end with fidelity to Christ and his ways (Gal 5:22–26). The second is an acute awareness of the wellbeing of the absent spouse—your counselee’s closest “neighbor” (Mark 12:31). You have the opportunity to help the person in counseling grow in how his or her personal behavior is either a stumbling block or a blessing to the absent spouse (1 Cor 8:7–13). The counselor, too, is called to love this person and keep his or her welfare in mind throughout the counseling process.

To begin, we will discuss the reasons why marriage counseling with one spouse takes place.

Why Does Marriage Counseling Occur with One Spouse?

The four most common reasons that counselors and pastors do marriage counseling with only one spouse are:

- It is the counselee’s preference to come alone.

- The other spouse refuses to come.
- The counselor or pastor prefers to work with one person.
- There is a crisis in the marriage that makes conjoint counseling unwise.

Let's discuss each scenario.

The counselee prefers to work on the marriage alone in counseling.

When only one spouse initiates counseling to address problems in his or her marriage, one of your first tasks is to understand this person's reasons for coming alone. Here are some possible motives that you might discover.

- *Fear.* The attending spouse wants to work, but is afraid to bring the other spouse in. Maybe it is a fear of sharing the frustrations about their marriage with the other spouse present. Perhaps the

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relationship is very fragile. The attending spouse fears that trying to talk through the problems together would break the already tenuous bond between them.

- *Avoidance of conflict.* The attending spouse doesn't want to fight and doesn't want to dredge up issues. This spouse prefers the predictability and intimacy of a private conversation with a counselor that doesn't carry the risk of escalation or interpersonal discomfort from a fight.
- *Over-responsibility.* The attending spouse might believe the problems in the marriage lie solely with himself or herself. It is common, when a person is controlled by the need for the other person to be pleased with him or her, to assume an inordinate amount of responsibility for marital peace and satisfaction. Or on the flip side, the non-attending spouse might be pushing the attending spouse to go to counseling and get "fixed," and the attending spouse comes to believe he or she really must be the problem.

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The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

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