

How to Find the Best Marriage Counselor for Your Needs

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Everyone desires "the best." When seeking a marriage counselor, it is vital to find someone specifically trained in marriage counseling and holding the credentials of a "licensed" or "certified" marriage counselor. Credentials indicate that they have demonstrated competence, have passed required tests, or met other criteria.

The best marriage counselor or therapist would comprehend system dynamics, marital developmental stages, problematic behavioral interactions, and how to interrupt those patterns. They would also possess in-depth knowledge and understanding of individual pathologies. However, when couples seek counseling from therapists trained solely in individual pathology, without understanding system dynamics, they may encounter a "helper" who reinforces dysfunctional interactions rather than assisting the couple in breaking old patterns. They may find a helper who "aligns" more closely with one partner, focusing on the "inappropriate" behavior of the other. Everyone involved needs to understand that each partner has their perception of the marriage and version of events. Relationship therapists are acutely aware of the pain involved in distressed relationships, yet they understand that the decision to stay together or divorce should always rest with the couple.

The best marriage counselor for a particular couple would also possess in-depth knowledge or experience in addressing specific issues the couple is facing (e.g., infidelity, addiction, death of a child, etc.). When dealing with addiction in the family, the best therapist would have credentials for working with substance use disorder and have experience working with the addiction process, from problem identification to long-term sobriety.

Similarly, many complicated couples and family issues require specialized knowledge, like family business issues, loss of a child, sandwich-generation marriages, and late-life issues.

The primary predictor of treatment outcome remains, as it has always been, the relationship with the therapist. Beginning your journey with the assurance that your therapist understands your concerns, identifies the real issues, and knows how to help solve them puts you three steps ahead in finding solutions. The "best" marriage therapist for you is out there.

Keep asking questions until you see them. **Note:** This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2011 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.



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