

Appendix 10: Domestic Violence and Couple Counselling

The question of whether couples in abusive relationships should engage in couple counselling is one which has general consensus among domestic abuse organisations. For example, the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) states categorically, "We at The Hotline do not encourage anyone in an abusive relationship to seek counselling with their partner. Abuse is not a relationship problem." The issue in an abusive relationship is one of [power and control](#). Abusers are often not interested in fixing the relationship but rather, maintaining control.

Therapy is designed to create a "safe space" for couples who are interested in healing their relationship. For an abused partner, that safety doesn't necessarily extend to their home.

Within a coercive controlling relationship, it is highly likely that anything shared in a counselling session that puts the abuser in a negative light will expose the survivor to negative consequences outside of the counselling room. The abuser may use what is said in the counselling room as an excuse to punish the abused person.

Another reason that couple's therapy or counselling is not recommended is that the facilitator may not know about the abuse, which would make the entire process ineffective. Abusers tend to be effective at manipulating the truth and they can often make their partner seem responsible for the problems, especially if the abused person does not feel confident to speak up in their own defence.

The view that couples in a violent relationship should never enter couple counselling is not universal in the counselling profession. The Gottman Institute advocates that "[All Domestic Violence is Not Created Equal](#)" John Gottman posits that there are two types of domestic violence, situational v characterological.

Situational violence occurs when arguments have escalated out of control and the partners are not able to effectively manage conflict. It could be initiated by either partner, it does not leave lasting injuries, and medical attention is not needed. Gottman's research indicates that this type of violence is by far the most common representing 80% of violent interactions.

Characterological violence is part of a person's character or personality. This type of abuse is intentional and calculated. There is a clear abuser and a clear victim. It is pervasive and insidious. Michael P Johnson, author of "Typology of Domestic Violence" describes this type of abuse as "intimate terrorism". In such relationships, couple counselling is definitely not recommended for the reasons stated above.

It is also important to note that a relationship can be violent without being abusive where there is no power differential, and each partner gives as good as they get. The legal definition of abuse involved a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour.

Gottman argues that situational violence is exacerbated by an inability to control emotions and that couples in such relationships can benefit from couple counselling that teaches them how to regulate their emotions in addition to conflict resolution skills.

Relationship counselling can help partners understand each other, resolve difficult problems, and even help the couple gain a different perspective on their situation.

Anyone in an abusive relationship should do thorough research and take sound advice before deciding whether to engage in couple counselling when there is violence in the relationship.