

# Dangers of Couples Counseling: *When abuse is present*

Couples counseling is beneficial to work on marital problems. Domestic Violence, however, is not a marital problem. It is a behavior that is solely the responsibility of the abusive person. This is true regardless of alleged ‘provocation’ since each person is ultimately responsible for their own behavior and actions.

Couples counseling in a domestic violence relationship could:

1. Endanger the survivor who may face more abuse for revealing information which is disapproved by the abusive partner
2. Lend credibility to the common misunderstanding that survivors are at least partially responsible for the abuse inflicted upon them
3. Minimize the seriousness of the abuse if the focus of counseling is on the couple’s current interactions
4. Imply the survivor has at least some responsibility for seeing that the abusive partner gets help. Therapists need to be particularly wary of abusive partners who refuse anything other than couples counseling
5. Leave the therapist without important details of the abuse that the survivor cannot disclose out of fear or threat from the abusive partner.

Ending abuse in the relationship is dependent solely on the abusive partner’s motivation and commitment to do so. This will not always happen and if it does, it will not occur overnight. It is possible only if the abusive partner seeks help and follows through.

Couples counseling can be revisited if, and only if the abusive partner has demonstrated long-term commitment to the lifelong work of:

- Assessing their behavior for control
- Taking accountability for their abusive actions
- Developing new relationship skills towards an equitable and safe relationship

For more information, see the handout *Assessment of Change in Abusive People*.

*Confronting the Batterer*. Phyllis B. Frank M.A. & Beverly D. Houghton PhD.  
Updated by DOVE July 2020