

Marital Mediation: A Therapeutic Perspective

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Compassionate psychotherapy promotes reconciliation. This healing process is often sought when couples are in acute crisis or a chronic state of bitterness and estrangement.

Marital healing or reconciliation is possible when the couple moves collaboratively toward and through their mutual hurt. With appropriate help, they can safely engage with each other around volatile or “taboo” subjects.

The couple may decide, before or during therapy, to enter into a “therapeutic separation” with the purpose of eventual reunion. Although this has risks, a “time out” may provide the opportunity to redefine or reconfigure their marriage, establish healthier relationship boundaries and prevent a premature dissolution of the marriage.

Whether a couple elects to separate therapeutically or to divorce, it is important to focus initially on “reconciliation” rather than “reunion,” even when one of the partners is against separation or divorce. Reconciliation does not necessarily imply reunion; neither does reunion imply reconciliation. Some couples work to reconcile and then decide not to reunite, in order to part without bitterness. Those couples who do not genuinely reconcile and prematurely reunite (e.g., through sexual attraction) risk further failure, either in their marriage or when they carry unreconciled wounds into subsequent relationships.

When a couple faces separation or divorce, mediation along with ongoing couple therapy is highly recommended. The complex legal, financial and parenting issues that separation opens up can be dealt with in mediation, freeing the couple to address the core emotional issues in therapy. In the long run, the combination of these two concurrent services can prove to be cost effective.

Mediation complements couples therapy by helping the couple become aware of the implications of a separation in a less adversarial arena and experience the beginning of resolution and reconciliation. The opportunity for a “reality check” can facilitate the couple’s emotional process (i.e., grief) in therapy. Mediation also can offer the couple additional emotional and spiritual resources, enabling them to better use the therapy to move through their hurt toward a healthy closure of the painful past and a confident hope in the future.

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