



Welcome to couples therapy

A guide to understanding your relationship, the pattern that keeps pulling you apart, and the ways we will work together so you can find each other again.



Dr. Mark Karris

Couples therapy · In person in San Diego and online

I'm glad you're here.

Reaching out for couples therapy takes courage. It usually means that something you care about deeply is hurting, and that you still have hope for it. I want you to know that both of those things are welcome here.

This packet is meant to give you a map before we begin. It describes how loving relationships drift into painful patterns, what tends to be underneath those patterns, and how we will work together to change them. Read it on your own or side by side. Nothing here is a test; it is simply a way to start the conversation.

We will make room for each of your perspectives, slow down the moments that keep going wrong, and work toward the changes that matter most to the two of you. I am looking forward to walking alongside you both.



Warmly,

Dr. Mark Karris

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Falling in love

In the early days, being together probably felt easy. You were thrilled by each other, could talk for hours, and found yourselves thinking about each other whenever you were apart.

You both wanted to show the finest parts of yourselves. You listened closely, gave each other the benefit of the doubt, and saw the best in each other and in your shared future. Whatever has happened since, that beginning was real, and the longing underneath it usually still is.



"I love you so much. I can't picture my life without you."

"You are the best thing that ever happened to me."

"I can't wait to see you again and feel your touch."

"You're all I think about. When can we hang out again?"

When love becomes complicated

Even when two people love each other deeply, closeness can become harder to find. Nobody plans for this. It happens slowly, through everyday pressures, missed connections, and hurts that never quite got resolved. Over time, the way you relate to each other begins to change, often without either of you noticing when it started.

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| ● Everyday stress and busyness | ● Miscommunication and misunderstanding |
| ● Overwork and exhaustion | ● Broken trust or betrayal |
| ● Parenting and family demands | ● Unresolved trauma from the past |
| ● Illness, loss, and life transitions | ● Emotional and sexual disconnection |
| ● Relational misattunements, large and small | ● Financial strain and disagreements |
| ● Societal and global stress | ● Differences in faith, values, or family culture |

The negative cycle of disconnection

Unaddressed hurts, misunderstandings, and missed chances to connect build up between two people. Over time, your reactions to each other can form a painful pattern that seems to take on a life of its own. Most couples who come to see me are caught in a version of it.

One common pattern: pursuing and withdrawing

The more I press, the more you pull away.

PURSUING

"I feel alone or unheard."

So I press, criticize, or get louder, hoping you will finally turn toward me.

WITHDRAWING

"I feel overwhelmed or like I can't get it right."

So I defend myself, go quiet, or pull away, hoping things will calm down.

The more you pull away, the harder I press.

One partner reaches for connection in a way that comes out as frustration or criticism. The other feels the sting of it, or feels helpless to fix it, and steps back to protect themselves and keep the peace. To the pursuing partner, that stepping back feels like abandonment, so they reach harder. To the withdrawing partner, the harder reach feels like an attack, so they retreat further. Each move makes complete sense from the inside, and each one makes the other partner's pain worse.

Neither of you is doing this on purpose. You are both responding to a feeling of threat in the relationship, and the responses have become automatic.

This is one possible cycle. Your pattern may look different, and your positions may shift depending on the topic or the season you are in.



The cycle is the problem, not your partner

When couples first arrive, each partner usually has a clear story about who is causing the trouble. Figuring out who started it is often less useful than noticing how each of you gets pulled in. One of the most important shifts in couples therapy is learning to see the cycle itself as the thing you are both up against, rather than seeing each other as the enemy.

That shift doesn't erase responsibility. Each of you is still accountable for how you treat the other, and sometimes one partner's behavior has caused real harm that needs to be named and repaired. But when you can both say, "There it is again, we're in the cycle," you stop being two people fighting each other and become two people standing on the same side, facing a shared opponent.

Other shapes the cycle can take

Pursue-and-withdraw is the most common pattern, but it is not the only one. See if any of these feel familiar.

Both of you attack

Arguments escalate fast. Criticism meets counter-criticism, old grievances get pulled in, and both of you end up saying things you regret. Underneath the heat, each of you is desperate to be understood.

Both of you withdraw

Things are quiet, polite, and distant. You rarely fight, but you rarely reach for each other either. Life runs in parallel. This pattern can be easy to miss because nothing looks wrong on the surface.

The pursuer stops reaching

After years of pressing without a response, the pursuing partner grows tired and goes quiet. The relationship may suddenly seem calmer, but often this is the sound of someone giving up, and it is worth taking seriously.

Pursue, then flip

Each of you takes turns. One presses while the other retreats, then the roles reverse when the topic changes. The constant is that someone is always reaching and someone is always protecting.

In my book *Beyond Fairy Tales*, I describe four negative cycles that I see most often with couples. Along the way, we will find the language that fits your particular pattern. Naming it together is the first step toward loosening its grip.

Beneath the argument

What you hear during an argument is usually very different from what your partner is actually feeling. The sharp words on the surface are often protecting something tender underneath. Slowing down helps us find the hurt, fear, or longing beneath a reaction.

WHAT WE HEAR

"You are so selfish. You never listen to me! Go and be on your dumb phone."

"You are so emotional. You are always nagging and complaining!"

WHAT MAY BE UNDERNEATH

The pursuing partner

"I feel alone and not special to you. I get loud in the hope that you will hear my longing for intimacy and connection."

The withdrawing partner

"I feel overwhelmed and inadequate. I don't know what to do, so I get defensive. I want to be the partner you deserve."

These are examples of possible feelings beneath the surface. Each partner's experience is their own, and understanding it comes from listening rather than assuming. One of my main jobs is to help each of you find the softer, truer words for what you feel, and to help the other hear them.

Your nervous system in conflict

When conflict with your partner heats up, your body often reacts before your thinking mind has a chance to catch up. Your heart rate climbs, your muscles tense, and the part of your brain that handles patience and perspective becomes harder to reach. Partners frequently describe saying things "they didn't mean" or going completely blank. This is the body's alarm system doing its job, treating a painful moment with your partner as if it were a danger.

The alarm tends to pull people in one of two directions. Learning to recognize which way your body goes, and which way your partner's does, changes how you understand each other.

Revved up

- Racing heart, flushed face, tight chest
- Talking faster and louder
- Urgency to resolve it right now
- Thoughts loop on what your partner did
- Hard to stop, even when you want to

Shutting down

- Going quiet, flat, or numb
- Mind goes blank, hard to find words
- Strong pull to leave the room or the topic
- Feeling far away from the moment
- Looks calm from the outside, but isn't

Why this matters for the two of you

A revved-up partner often reads shutting down as coldness or indifference. A shut-down partner often reads the revving up as an attack. Neither reading is quite right. Both states are the body trying to get safe, just in opposite ways. When we can recognize them as they happen, we can respond to each other with more accuracy and more compassion.

Understanding your nervous system explains your reactions; it doesn't excuse them. Each of us is still responsible for what we do with a flooded body. The good news is that regulation is a skill. In our sessions you will learn to notice the early signs, slow things down, and come back to each other. Being regulated doesn't mean waiting until you feel completely calm. It means being settled enough to stay present, think flexibly, and stay in contact with what you actually feel.

A simple place to start. When either of you notices the alarm going off, you can say, "I'm getting flooded, I need a short break, and I'll come back." Then take twenty minutes or so to settle your body, and return as promised. The return matters more than the pause.

What to expect in couples therapy



I want to understand what brought you here and what you hope will change. Our work will include conversation, attention to your emotional experience, and plenty of opportunities to try new ways of reaching each other, right there in the session.

In our sessions

- I want to hear about your goals.
- I will help you talk with each other.
- I will explore each of your perspectives.
- I will explore what your body is telling you.
- I want to hear about your strengths.
- I will provide relational guidance.
- I want to hear about your hurts.
- I will work to create a safe environment.
- I will explore your negative cycle.
- I will be your cheerleader and your coach.
- I will honor and explore your feelings.
- I will keep an eye on how therapy is going.

The shape of our work

At the beginning

Understanding your story

We get to know each other. I listen to how you met, what has happened since, and what each of you is hoping for. We start mapping the cycle you get caught in.

In the middle

Going underneath

We slow the pattern down and find the softer feelings beneath the reactions. Each of you practices sharing them, and practices receiving them from the other.

Later on

Building what's new

With more safety between you, we repair old hurts, work through the practical issues that got stuck, and strengthen the habits that keep you close.

We will keep your goals in view as we go, paying attention to what helps you understand each other and make meaningful changes. Sessions work the same way whether we meet in person or online.

My integrative approach

My approach is integrative, experiential, and attachment-oriented. I draw on several well-researched models, with attention to trauma, nervous system regulation, and the emotional dynamics between the two of you. Our work will be collaborative and respectful, with room for both of your perspectives, and we will keep returning to the changes that matter to you.

EFT Emotionally Focused Therapy **PRIMARY FRAMEWORK**

This is my home base. EFT helps us understand the attachment needs underneath your conflict, explore the emotions driving it, and change the painful interaction patterns that keep you apart. It is one of the most thoroughly researched approaches to couples therapy.

TCT Transformative Couples Therapy

Close attention to bodily sensations, small gestures, and brief moments of warmth that can open up new experiences of connection within a session.

PACT Psychobiological Approach to Couples Therapy

Understanding how your nervous systems respond to each other, and learning to help one another stay present and regulated when emotions intensify.

IFS Internal Family Systems

Curiosity and compassion toward the protective parts of you that show up in conflict, creating more choice in how you respond to each other.

RLT Relational Life Therapy

Honesty, accountability, and care, including taking real responsibility for how each of you affects the relationship.

You don't need to know any of these models to benefit from our work. I mention them so you know that what we do together is thoughtful and grounded, not improvised. To learn more about my approach, visit markgregorykarris.com/couples-therapy.



Making the most of therapy

A few things to keep in mind as we begin our work together. None of these are rules. They are the habits I have seen help couples get the most from this process.

1 Embrace the journey of connection

Some couples hope one or two sessions will "fix" things. Deepening your emotional connection is a process of growth, and rebuilding your bond will take time. Give it that time.

3 Keep it real

Openness, truthfulness, and vulnerability matter. As our work becomes safer, share your thoughts, feelings, and fears as honestly as you can. It helps us understand each other more deeply.

5 Stay committed to the process

Consistent sessions and attention to your relationship between sessions matter. Lasting change takes effort from both of you. In each session, I promise to bring professionalism and care.

7 Try new ways of being together

Through experience, I will help you become more accessible, responsive, and engaged with each other. Practice these ways of connecting outside of our sessions, too, even when it feels awkward at first.

9 Expect some bumps

Progress in couples therapy is rarely a straight line. A hard week after a good session doesn't mean the work isn't helping. It usually means we have found something important.

2 Explore the pain to find healing

We will sometimes sit with painful emotions and experiences. This is a chance to understand and heal these wounds together. I will guide and support you through these conversations.

4 Practice listening with curiosity

Listening with empathy is hard, especially when you disagree. Try to listen for what your partner means and feels, not just for the words you object to. I will help when you get stuck.

6 Be patient with each other and yourselves

Change takes time. Be patient as your partner works on their part, and be gentle with yourself as you work on yours. I know painful events and repeated disconnection can make this hard.

8 Bring one thing, not everything

When something happens between sessions, it helps to bring the moment that mattered most rather than the full list. One moment, explored carefully, teaches us more than ten covered quickly.

10 Tell me how it's going

I have a therapeutic map, and I am committed to walking alongside you. Let me know what feels helpful, what feels difficult, and where you feel stuck, so the work stays responsive to your needs.

Between sessions

Most of your relationship happens outside of our time together. The small things you do in an ordinary week shape your bond more than any single session can. Here are a few practices to begin with. Pick one or two that feel doable rather than trying all of them at once.



A daily ten-minute check-in

Set aside a few minutes each day with phones away. Ask each other how the day actually went, and what it was like on the inside. The point is to be known a little, not to solve anything.

"What was the best and hardest part of your day?"



Name the cycle when you spot it

When you feel the familiar pattern starting, say so out loud. Naming it interrupts it, and it reminds you both that the cycle, not your partner, is what you're fighting.

"I think we're getting pulled into our thing. Can we slow down?"



Reach softly

When you need something from your partner, try asking from the softer feeling rather than from the frustration. Soft and slow helps the relationship grow; hard and fast tends to make it crash.

"I've been missing you. Could we have some time together this week?"



Repair early and often

Every couple has moments that go sideways. What matters most is the turn back toward each other afterward. A small, sincere repair within a day does more for trust than a perfect apology a month later.

"I didn't like how I spoke to you earlier. I'm sorry. Can we try again?"



Say the appreciation out loud

Most of us notice what our partner does well and keep it to ourselves. Say it. One specific appreciation a day quietly changes the climate of a relationship.

"Thank you for handling the morning. I noticed, and it helped."

A positive cycle of connection

Your responses can build connection just as surely as they can erode it. As you slow down, hear each other more clearly, and respond with care, reaching for one another becomes easier, and the reach is more likely to be met.

Slow down and listen

I make room for your feelings and your vulnerability instead of jumping to defend or fix.

Feel heard

You feel understood, and that understanding makes it safer to open up in return.

Respond with care

We meet each other with warmth, and both of us experience more love and understanding.

Face stress together

Feeling supported, we can weather life's storms as a team rather than as two people under pressure.

Feel more secure

Repeated moments of care strengthen our bond, and the next reach gets a little easier.



What we're working toward

My goal is to help you strengthen your communication and address the issues that brought you here. Together, we will work to mend old wounds, rebuild trust, and deepen your emotional and physical closeness. Along the way, I hope each of you will come to know yourself a little better, too.

Most of all, I want you to leave with a stronger bond and reliable ways to find each other again when life gets difficult. The hard moments will still come; what changes is that you will know how to get back to each other when they do.

A few things worth knowing

Some practical notes about how couples therapy works with me. If anything here raises a question, please ask. There are no wrong questions at the start of this process.

The relationship is my client

In couples work, I am not on one partner's side against the other. I am on the side of the relationship and of each of you within it. There will be moments when I lean toward one of you to help the other hear something, and I will try to balance that over time.

Hard things are allowed

If there is something important that feels difficult to raise in front of your partner, let me know. We will think together about how and when to approach it. Couples therapy tends to work best when I am not holding secrets between you, so I will be honest with you about that as well.

In person or online

I meet with couples in my San Diego office and by secure video. Both work well. If we meet online, find a private, quiet space where you can both be on screen together, and give yourselves a few minutes afterward before stepping back into the day.

Both of you matter equally

Each of you will have room to speak and to be heard. If you ever feel I have missed your perspective or taken a side unfairly, please tell me. That feedback helps the work, and I would rather hear it than have you carry it silently.

Your safety comes first

Vulnerability is only possible where it is safe enough. If there is intimidation, coercion, or fear in your relationship, or if either of you feels unsafe at home, please tell me, privately if needed. We will figure out the right next steps together.

Between our sessions

You are welcome to reach out for scheduling and brief questions. If something significant comes up, make a note of it and bring it to our next session, where we can give it the attention it deserves.

For more about my background, approach, and writing, visit markgregorykarris.com/couples-therapy.

I'm looking forward to working with you.

You have already done something meaningful by reaching for help together. Whatever brought you here, and however stuck things feel right now, there is a way forward, and we will look for it together.

Warmly,

Dr. Mark Karris

Mark Karris, PsyD, LMFT

Couples therapist, clinical educator, and author



markgregorykarris.com

In person in San Diego and online

