

COUPLE SELF-IMPROVEMENT? COUPLE COUNSELING? NEITHER? BOTH? A Guide Through the Choices

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Let's say you and your romantic couple partner are talking about possibly looking for a way to improve the quality of your relationship. Perhaps some friends of yours you've always thought had a great marriage recently mentioned that they are seeing a couple counselor. What do you suppose that's all about? And your church bulletin last week announced a new couple self-improvement workshop being scheduled soon. What goes on in a "couple self-improvement workshop?"

You and your spouse feel like your relationship is "pretty normal"—you argue about issues or problems now and then, and sometimes those disagreements can get heated, but don't all couples have conflicts to work out from time to time? Maybe you don't do as many things together as you used to, but everyone is so busy these days; who does?

Would you learn anything in a self-improvement workshop worth devoting three hours to? Would you be asked personal questions or have to talk about private things in a group? On the other hand, would you be missing an opportunity to see if these professionals know anything of value that you don't already know? And could it maybe even possibly be a pleasant, fun experience?

What would help you decide whether to sign up for our self-improvement workshop? You don't feel distressed about your relationship—at least not very often—but how should you decide?

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The first author has been counseling, teaching, and advising folks since the early 1960s—the second author since the mid-70s. At the Lewis Research Foundation (which, back then, was called the Timberlawn Research Foundation), we were the first multidisciplinary, clinically based research team to study the full range of individuals, couples, and families. Our group of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and sociologists contributed scores of professional presentations and publications with ground-breaking findings on psychologically healthy individuals, couples, and families.

So, we've certainly had plenty of opportunities to answer your concerns about whether we know anything of value that everyone else doesn't already know. We've been sharing our findings with therapy clients and fellow mental health professionals. But our newest book (reference #1 below) and the content of our **Couple Workshop: Toward a More Fulfilling Romantic Couple Relationship** are new endeavors for us.

And to address your perfectly reasonable concerns, would you be asked personal questions or be expected to talk about private things in the group? No, and no. You won't have to talk at all to absorb our information. Some folks don't feel comfortable speaking up in a group, and that's OK. We are open to and will encourage questions, concerns, and challenges. Still, there will be opportunities before the program starts and after the program is over for you to speak to us individually.

And could it maybe even be fun? The two presenters will be having fun, and our experience with groups is that it's usually contagious.

The Workshop Format

The authors of this essay will be the workshop presenters. We will arrive at the venue around 8:00 AM to set up a 9:00 AM start time. There will be coffee and snacks for the participants, all of whom we hope will arrive in time to meet us and chat with one another. There will be some handouts for you to read and keep.

Dr. Carlos Davis will welcome you and get us started at 9:00 AM. Dr. John Gossett will be second-up. Between the two of us, we will walk you through some PowerPoint slides that we hope will get us all on the same wavelength. It will significantly augment your understanding of this material if you have read our book

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(reference #1 below) in advance. We strongly encourage you to bring the book to the workshop, as we will refer to it from time to time.

Some of our material is counterintuitive, so we encourage questions and challenges.

The slides will be supplemented by real-life, recent video recordings of research participant couples we have asked to engage in problem-solving discussions. The sequences we will share were selected to illustrate optimal and not so optimal ways to handle problem-solving discussions. We will already have covered enough content to give us plenty of discussion material. Still, we will go over additional topics of interest during the remainder of the three-hour format, ending at noon.

Choice #1: This Workshop

We strive to make this workshop a good experience for everyone, starting with the *Simply Curious*. You are reasonably confident that your romantic relationship is in good shape, so you don't think you *need* either counseling or self-help (and you're most likely correct), but you are open to new material as long as it is rational and evidence-based. That may sound a little strange—after all, why would anyone offer relationship improvement material that was irrational or had no solid grounding in accepted theories or research findings?

Check out reference #2 below. Elizabeth Weil, a professional New York Times feature writer, devoted a year to trying 14 different approaches to improve romantic couple relationships. Some were highly irrational, and few were well-grounded in either accepted theory or research findings.

Let the buyer beware—there are many self-proclaimed “experts” offering bogus relationship enhancement books, workshops, and counseling experience courses. Ms. Weil and her husband survived their search for couple improvement and found it, but perhaps more despite than due to most of the programs they tried.

Our workshop content is rational throughout, theoretically sound, and research-based. It either will be helpful or won't, but it should not confuse or mislead you.

Choice #2: Other Self-Improvement Approaches

You might want to read Ms. Weil's book. Her experiences could help you spot the junk programs and phony "professionals" more quickly.

Browse the self-help shelves in a bookstore. Plan to spend a couple of hours or more—there are scores of popular books in this genre, most written by non-professional survivors of one kind of catastrophe or another.

Google your specific interest—couple self-improvement, couple enhancement, couple problem solving, or your particular concern. Add Dallas at the end of your phrases to see what's available locally.

In addition to our book and Elizabeth Weil's, we recommend two others, references #3 and #4 below. We'll get back to them in what follows.

Now let's suppose that instead of feeling *Simply Curious*, it's more like you are *Concerned but not Deeply Worried*. There are many reasons you might be concerned about your couple relationship, but beneath these surface factors, you are likely experiencing some troubling loss of closeness. Or it may seem that you and your partner are arguing more and getting less resolved than is desirable. Or maybe you are experiencing both an increase in conflict and a decrease in closeness.

At this level of discomfort, the material in our book, especially Chapter 19 and the Addendum to Chapter 19, may give you some leads on how to talk with your partner about these concerns. This Addendum to Chapter 19, entitled More How To, is contained in the first 20 pages of our Supplement to the book. References #3 and #4 are likely to cover these same individual concerns in more detail if you can wade through the forest to find the trees of your specific interest.

But what if you are *Distressed About Your Relationship*. Research studies have shown that virtually all couples argue and "fight" now and then. All couples experience times of greater emotional distance from each other than at other times. And there are no clear-cut signs that say "this much" distance or "that much" conflict is beyond normal.

But we need to digress a bit. If you share your dilemma with family members, friends, or colleagues at work, you will get two equally unhelpful pieces of advice: "your partner needs to see a therapist," or "that's all perfectly normal." These instant

judgments are almost always unhelpful for at least two reasons—first, neither you nor your partner can give an accurate account of all sides of the problem—you just can't. Therapists are trained to know that we all are the heroes of our own narratives.

Second, the listener will have no more ability to accurately see the line that separates normal from beyond normal than you do. And there is a third reason why you should not be sharing your intimate relationship “dirty laundry” with relatives, friends, or colleagues—namely; it's private. Period. Please don't do it. Or, perhaps we should say, stop doing it.

Choice #3: Consider Seeing a Professional Counselor

Of course, the person to talk to first about these concerns is your couple partner. One or more “heart-to-heart” talks may be all that's needed to get your relationship back on track. If that doesn't work, this might be an indication to pursue self-help sources: google searching, bookstore browsing, self-improvement reading, and workshops, perhaps including ours. We would be delighted to see you, and you won't be asked to share why you're there.

At 119 pages plus a 30-page Supplement, our book is one of the most concise written sources available. And as you will quickly see, not all 149 pages are directly focused on self-improvement, as we also addressed teachers, therapists, and researchers. Study the parts that speak to you, quickly skim the parts that don't. We set out to cover the main points for all four groups, but brevity and clarity were high priorities for our writing team. And we believe that folks interested in self-improvement will benefit from seeing how our material is helpful to educators, researchers, and therapists.

Reconcilable Differences, Second Edition, by Christensen, Doss, and Jacobson (reference #3 below) at 348 pages (all for couples seeking self-improvement), is a clear step up in thoroughgoing detail. But be forewarned—there's a lot of jargon. Dr. Christensen and his pals missed the memo on brevity and clarity. And there are more “do's” and “don'ts” than anyone could remember. As with our book, study the parts that speak to you, lightly skim the remainder.

Our fourth reference, *Fighting for Your Marriage, A Deluxe Revised Edition, Third Edition*, by Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg, is the most detailed at 448 pages plus

a DVD. Better than Christensen et al. on clarity, but on brevity, not so much. A million “do’s” and “don’ts.” Well, it seemed like a million.

If you’ve consumed our reference list and maybe a workshop or two and are still distressed about your relationship, we encourage you and your partner to seek an appointment with a professional couple therapist. References #3 and #4 both contain suggestions about finding a good one. We thought that Chapter 16 in *Reconcilable Differences* was beneficial.

Choice #4: When Couple Counseling is Not Enough or Not Indicated

You sense that the problems in your relationship are Severe and Possibly Dangerous. The disagreements between you and your partner have escalated to misery-inducing, name-calling, threat-making fights, and the physical encounters have moved beyond an occasional push, shove, or slap. Closed fist hitting, choking, weapon brandishing, destruction of property, forced sex, and other similar actions may already have occurred or been threatened.

At this level of conflict, the batterer is usually the man. The most significant risk is how difficult it is for many women to assess the dangerousness of such encounters correctly. Please be advised: couple counseling would be a wasted sham if both partners hid the severity of their fights but would increase the danger to the victim if she tells the truth to a therapist in the presence of the partner and then returns home with the now even more enraged batterer.

There is currently no known way to safely de-escalate this level of relationship violence other than distance and time—and physically getting out of the situation is the most dangerous time for the woman, the children, the family pets, and valued property. This requires forethought, professional help, and removal to locations unknown to the batterer for an extended period. Chapter 15 in *Reconcilable Differences* and the section titled Getting More Help in *Fighting for Your Marriage* are strongly recommended.

Self-improvement programs, including ours, are not appropriate in potentially violent situations. They would focus on the relationship problems without any means to control or contain the dangerousness.

There are several other situations in which couple counseling must either be postponed or augmented. Job loss and ongoing unemployment can create such

severe stress and financial problems that financial and job-finding services may need to be added to the therapy or may preclude counseling.

Severe, chronic, or life-threatening illness or disability in a couple partner, child, or parent might require the precedence or addition of relevant community resources.

Drug or alcohol abuse or addiction; severe eating disorders; destructive gambling; compulsive sexual promiscuity; deep involvement in internet pornography or gaming; chronic, extreme lying, deception, and dishonesty; or other thought/affect/behavioral-dominating activities can easily impair or overwhelm couple counseling and may need to be addressed either before or concurrently with couple relationship therapy.

Lack of sexual interest in one partner or inability of one partner to perform sexually may require specialized expertise beyond that of the average couple therapist.

Severe mental health problems can impair or postpone couple therapy. Severe depression is perhaps the most common, but severe anxiety, paranoia, bipolar episodes, post-partum psychiatric disorders, borderline, antisocial, and narcissistic personality disorders, and others can impair or postpone relationship therapy.

Infidelity in committed romantic relationships is an incredibly disruptive problem in what often appear to be conventional, well-controlled couples. Christensen et al. discuss the couple therapy-related issues involved in infidelity as well as any writers we've read on pages 298-308 of *Reconcilable Differences*.

As promised, we've walked you through the choices: couple self-improvement, couple counseling, neither, or both—so what will it be? **Our book is available to you without charge if you think you might be interested in our workshop. Contact our Administrator (see below), and she'll send it right out to you.**

If you can see yourself in one of the first three groups we have described (the simply curious, the concerned but not deeply worried, or the distressed), we think our workshop could be a very productive and pleasant way for you to spend half a day. But if you are in the fourth group, where you sense that the problems in your

relationship are severe and possibly dangerous, then our workshop might well make your painful situation even worse and more dangerous at this time.

We encourage the partners in this last group of couples to seek safety and support separately rather than together as a couple. Then perhaps you and your partner can find the peace and serenity you need, and maybe we'll reencounter one another on better terms someday.

References

1. *Lewis Foundation Couple and Family Evaluation Scales: A Rater Training Guide*, 2018, by John T. Gossett, Ph.D.; Carlos W. Davis, Jr., Ph.D.; Karen J. Prager, Ph.D.; Julie A. Parsons, M.S.; and M. Matthew Housson, Ph.D. 119 pages. And *More How To*, the Addendum to Chapter 19, 2019, by John T. Gossett, Ph.D., and Carlos W. Davis, Jr., Ph.D. The first twenty pages in the *Supplement to the Lewis Foundation Couple and Family Evaluation Scales: A Rater Training Guide*, 2020, by John T. Gossett, Ph.D., and Carlos W. Davis, Jr., Ph.D. 30 pages.

This book was written for four distinct groups of readers—couple partners interested in self-improvement; couple and family research professionals; high school, college, and graduate school educators; and couple and family counselors and therapists.

Persons interested in self-improvement will find useful information throughout this brief book before being re-emphasized and elaborated in Chapter 19, Use of the Lewis Scales for Individual, Couple, or Family Self-Improvement, and the Addendum to Chapter 19, *More How To*. Included with the book are (a) a copy of the *Lewis Scales* used to measure how couples and families deal with issues, disagreements, problems, and conflicts; (b) a *Scoring Summary* form that yields performance measures on 12 evidence-based dimensions of couple and family systems; (c) the Addendum to Chapter 19 titled *More How To* mentioned above which supplements the “how to” use our information to enhance your couple or family functioning provided within Chapter 19; and (d) a paper titled *Couple Workshop: Toward a More Fulfilling Romantic Couple Relationship* written to inform interested folks about our coming self-improvement workshop.

This last piece also explains how to get on our invitation list for our Couple Self-Improvement Workshop.

We believe that the longer, much more detailed books on couple self-improvement, such as #3 and #4 below, are valuable reference materials. But we do *not* believe that general public couples are likely to remember very many of the hundreds of “do’s” and “don’ts” contained therein, nor are that many “rules” even necessary to initiate significant and lasting improvement in closeness and problem-solving in most couples.

Our approach is to highlight the basics in plain English, hit them, and move on, leaving it to each couple to elaborate their own “rules,” “do’s,” and “don’ts” that flower quite naturally from *understanding the basic concepts* rather than trying to memorize hundreds of seemingly disconnected loose ends.

Our book may be ordered from the Administrator of the Lewis Foundation at 214-388-0451 or by email at jmlewisfoundation@att.net.

2. *No Cheating, No Dying—I Had a Good Marriage Then I Tried to Make It Better*, 2012, by Elizabeth Weil. 177 pages.

Ms. Weil, a New York Times feature writer, is not a mental health professional. Still, she is a superb investigative reporter and knows how to read, understand, and report on scientific publications. Unfortunately, she didn’t dig very deep in her search for help. Fourteen approaches in 12 months? Really.

This may be partly due to being located in San Francisco, well-known for offbeat, poorly trained, oddball “helpers” in many professions, including couple self-improvement and couple counseling programs. In addition, her determination to be humorous rather than serious required her to “make fun of” most of the programs and helpers she encountered. And she was quick to accept the negative opinions of the value of couple counseling and self-help of a small number of professionals when she easily could have found a more significant number of more positive evaluations had she conducted a more balanced search.

You must wonder why we are recommending her book—it's precisely because it was so easy for her to find so many pseudo-gurus, phony programs, and so much worthless information. As we noted on page 3 above, "Let the buyer beware."

But despite all the bad advice and useless programs, Ms. Weil's high intelligence, innate sense of fair play, and finely tuned b.s. detector allowed her to find the gold amidst all the dross: "the 'good enough' marriage, in psychiatry at least, is characterized by its capacity to allow spouses to keep growing, its ability to give the partners involved the strength and bravery to face the world." (Page 171).

Ms. Weil's summary takeaway is strikingly close to the message our couple and family research led us to 50 + years ago, and that subsequent research and clinical experience have reinforced over and over—normal, psychologically healthy development in long-term romantic partners is expressed in continued growth in both individual autonomy and relationship connectedness.

Her terms: "its capacity to allow spouses to keep growing...."

Our terms: "continued growth in...individual autonomy...."

Her terms: "its ability to give the partners involved the strength and bravery to face the world."

Our terms: "continued growth in...relationship connectedness."

Available at bookstores and Amazon on the internet.

3. *Reconcilable Differences, Second Edition*, 2014, by Andrew Christensen, Ph.D.; Brian D. Doss, Ph.D.; and Neil S. Jacobson, Ph.D. 348 pages.

Much longer than our book, this classic compendium is chock-full of insights if you can force your way through the occasional thickets of made-up words and jargon. The descriptive chapter titles and the 11-page index will help you find the parts most relevant for you if reading it straight through is too daunting.

That these three highly expert university professors could write in plain English is demonstrated by the detailed and complex but readily comprehensible piece on Infidelity on pages 298-308. It's too bad they didn't allow themselves to stay with that style throughout.

Given that two-thirds of the troubling issues that arise most often in long-term relationships are unresolvable, Part III, *From Argument to Acceptance*, is especially valuable, and is bolstered by Part IV, *Deliberate Change through Acceptance*. Many couples struggle endlessly trying to force resolution of unresolvable issues that instead must simply be accepted. Does anyone tell young folks preparing for marriage that they must accept rather than get their partners to change most of what will bedevil them in married life? Does anyone tell any of us at any age about that? Christensen, Doss, and Jacobson are telling us here that once we learn how to negotiate acceptance rather than fight to change what can't be changed, life goes so much more smoothly, comfortably, and lovingly.

It is probably not available at your bookstore, but they can order it for you, or you can order it at Amazon.com.

4. *Fighting for Your Marriage, Deluxe Revised Edition, Third Edition*, 2010, by Howard J. Markman, Ph.D.; Scott Stanley, Ph.D.; and Susan L. Blumberg, Ph.D. Four hundred forty-eight pages and an attached DVD.

Despite being three times longer than it needed to be, the writing generally is quite clear. If the topic in couple self-improvement you're looking for isn't in this book, we'll be surprised.

Note for references #3 and #4: If you can keep from being overwhelmed by the hundreds of "do's" and "don'ts" in these two incredibly detailed books—which will not be easy—they are packed with practical, reality-based information.

We believe they both are well worth the effort to read and strongly recommend them.

This book also is available on Amazon but probably is not carried in most bookstores. A phone call to your favorite bookstore would quickly confirm whether either of these last two self-help classics is in stock.

About the Authors

John T. Gossett, Ph.D., served as an Army psychologist from 1963 to 1965. He joined the staff of Timberlawn Psychiatric Hospital in 1965 and added research to his activities at the Timberlawn Research Foundation in 1966. Dr. Gossett served as Director of the hospital's Psychology Department from 1981 to 1992 and Director of the Research Foundation from 1988 to 1999. He taught as an Adjunct Professor at the University of Dallas, Southern Methodist University, and the University of Texas at Dallas. Supposedly retired in 1999, he currently serves as Lewis Scales Consultant to the Lewis Research Foundation. He is the author, co-author, or editor of several professional books and over 100 professional publications. He stopped counting the number of consultations, workshops, and professional presentations years ago. His primary professional interest at this time is in creating and leading couple self-improvement workshops.

Carlos W. Davis, Jr., Ph.D. Dr. Davis joined the staff of Terrell State Hospital in 1978. He served there as the Chief of Psychological Services and as Director of the Substance Abuse Unit. He joined the staff at Timberlawn Psychiatric Hospital in 1985 as the Psychologist for Substance Abuse Services. He served as Director of the Timberlawn Hospital Psychology Department from 1992 to 1997. Dr. Davis is a former President of the Dallas Psychological Association and was the Director of the Division of Applied Psychology for the Texas Psychological Association. Currently, he teaches and supervises students as an adjunct assistant professor in clinical psychology at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School. He has been the Director of the Jerry M. Lewis, M.D. Mental Health Research Foundation since 1999 and maintains a private clinical psychology practice.