

# Marriage Counseling Advice

*power to do great things...*  
By HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok  
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I see it all the time. I see these individuals with their fancy titles who call themselves social worker, counselor, doctor and psychologist. Many simply call what they do counseling, asking direction or seeking advice. I see how they work to supposedly heal others of their mental or emotional imbalances and other problems. As a Rabbi, I too am a counselor, yet trained radically different from them. What I do is not what they do. My goal is not their goal. My way is not their way. Let me explain to you why.

First let me differentiate between counseling for life guidance and medical psychiatric issues. When a psychiatric issue is at stake and medication is needed, this needs to be addressed in another forum. Psychiatrists are trained to be doctors and to issue medication. This does not mean that they have counseling abilities or experience. If a psychiatrist is merely issuing medication, then the rest of this essay does not apply to them. However, if along with medication they also seek to provide counseling, then this essay most definitely does apply. Now, let us get down to business.

What is the purpose of counseling? Why does a person seek out the guidance of a psychologist or similar level mental health so-called professional? The answer is supposed to be because something is wrong and needs to be fixed. After all, is this not the reason why we go to any other type of doctor? If my arm is broken, the doctor can fix it; this we understand. Yet, what exactly is broken when we go to a mental health practitioner and what exactly is the fix? Here is where answers get rather murky and difficult.

The so-called professional will say that they clearly recognize the problem with the individual and simply need to take the time in guided discussion to help the person realize the wrong of their ways. Sometimes the individual is so deluded in their thinking that much time is needed to totally reorient their outlook on life. Thus the program of mental health intervention begins. In the end, the individual is persuaded to accept other philosophies and outlooks on life that match the so-called practitioner's preconceived notions of what is normal and what the individual is supposed to be like.

In the end, mental health counseling only succeeds in cloning its preconceived idea from the mind of the so-called professional into the mind of the so-called patient. This is called being cured. But I ask you, is this an actually cleansing of internal psychological content that is unhealthy for the individual, or is it really a "brain-washing," where the individual is

convinced that their previous ways were terribly wrong and now the new model packaged and delivered by the so-called therapist is one's salvation and ticket to normality?

Who is supposed to decide what is and is not normal and healthy. Is there an objective guide to mental health as there is for physical health? No, no such guide exists. The guide that defines emotional, mental and social disorders is so politicized that from one edition of the text to the next, entire categories are added or removed based upon the popular opinions of the time. This subjectivity clearly disqualifies it as having any objective value. Any counselor attempting to diagnose and treat someone based upon socially conceived notions of mental health or illness is, in my opinion, actually committing an act of abuse instead of one of healing.

I have heard it said that there are absolutely no scientific studies that validate that talking with a so-called mental health professional is any better for one than having a deep heart-to-heart conversation with a close friend, relative or minister. Communications between two caring human beings can be very therapeutic, even without years of so-called professional training.

Counseling, for me, is not trying to convince the other party of anything. I do not believe in objective rights and wrongs in this respect. I do know that every human being is different and perceives the world around us in a different way than even the closest ones around us. I believe these differences, as weird and strange as they may be, are sacred and unique expressions of the individual's personality. I do not consider these to be mental health problems at all. I never concern myself with how one views the world or any specific situation, I only concern myself with their behavior and what they do.

Sometimes behaviors cause conflict and strife. Sometimes certain behaviors are destructive. Behaviors of this kind can and do cause problems. Questionable behaviors should therefore be addressed. However, the underlying mentalities that govern those behaviors may or may not be problematic. Modern style mental health counseling tries to directly change the underlying attitudes of the individual and by doing so change their behavior. In my opinion, this is backward thinking and akin to brain-washing.

I am not interested in pursuing this line of concern in the political or social arena. This is not my venue or concern. I care about individuals only, about real everyday people like you and me. I care about what we do and maybe even how we do it. One can choose if one wishes, to go into in-depth counseling to discover one's true motivations and attitudes and allow the individual to ponder them. This process may indeed take a long time. This path may or may not be of value. It all depends on the individual. However, when behaviors are concerned, these do not require in-depth analysis and mental arm-twisting techniques used so commonly today. On the contrary, behaviors can be addressed rather quickly and directly to the point.

When I, in my role as Rabbi/Pastoral Counselor, see a married couple, I often see two individuals with distinct and different outlooks on life. The two come from different backgrounds and simply view life in a way different from their partner. These differences are augmented by the fact that men and women are as psychologically different as they are physically. Simply we each see the world, the family and each other through our own individual eyes. It is only natural that we see things differently and have different opinions on many things.

I do not consider it necessary that the views of one win out over the other. I consider such conflict to be mutually destructive. The views of the individual should be considered sacred and respected, as long as they are not destructive or harmful in any way. Mind you, we should not play and twist logic to make things appear more dangerous and destructive than they really are. How many times have I heard, “what if this,” and “this could lead to that.” I often hear the “what could be,” and “what should be” arguments, but I rarely ever hear about the “what is.” This, in my opinion is the crux of the problem.

Many individuals are so wrapped up in their own heads and their own ideas that they believe the whole world is insane simply because the world does not operate according to the principles of normality that the individual holds by. How can you be normal, when you do not see things like I do? Right and wrong are so clear to me, how come you cannot see it? Everybody knows this or that is true, why don't you? If you don't see things in this or that way, if you can't recognize what is right or wrong according to their definition or if you cannot see the truth as others see it, then you are the one with the problem. This is how many individuals think, including many mental health professionals. They are trained to be subtle about what they say and how they express their thoughts. Yet, deep down, they are human beings like everyone else and share our common human tendency to be prejudiced and narrow minded.

One thus might think that the problem with much in modern counseling begins with the therapist, but I do not see it this way. In my opinion, the problem with modern style mental health therapies begins with the whole style of the therapy. The therapist is trained to follow a model that he/she had drummed into his/her head through years of schooling. Like a robot the therapist is trained to listen to the person, then to diagnose what is wrong according to the book, giving it a label and then to prescribe a course of discussion wherein which attitudes and then behaviors are adjusted to fit the counselor's idea of mental health.

This situation is so arbitrary and subject to abuse that in my opinion it negates the value of almost the entire system. Counselors today are only as good as the counsel they provide. The counsel they provide is obviously the expression of their own beliefs. But what are those beliefs? If they are as arbitrary and singular as the one coming for the counseling then we have a clash of worldviews and the one who can convince or better say “brainwash” the other is the winner. This is not counseling and certainly does not lead to mental health. On the

contrary it can lead to mental confusion and further inner turmoil for the individual. Again, in my opinion, this is mental abuse, not mental health counseling.

Husbands and wives have different outlooks on life that are both equal and sacred. How then can a marriage counselor do anything other than to help one understand the other. Mind you, understanding one another does not mean to agree with one another. It simply means that one understands the other well enough to either agree or disagree. In my opinion, for a counselor to take a side in such a counseling situation totally negates the absolute detached position the counselor must always have.

It does not matter what the counselor thinks about the views and opinions of either the husband or wife. As long as such views are not dangerous in the “what is before us in the here and now,” then they should not be of concern. Yet, counselors are trained to deal with ideas and these always address the “what ifs.” In my opinion, addressing the “what ifs” misdirects the issue from the “what is.” And only “what is” is what is important! “What is” refers to behavior. Behaviors need to be agreed upon, but not necessarily the reasoning underlying them. In other words, I do not care what you think; I care about what you do, regardless of what you think.

Disagree all you want. It is OK. Think the other is as crazy or wrong as can be, this too is OK. What matters is not what you think, but rather what you do! Counseling must be focused on coming to an arrangement of behaviors agreeable to both parties and not necessarily one agreeable to the counselor. Behaviors that need to be agreed upon are day to day things such as how one should discipline the children, how much money can and cannot be spent, what is allowed and not allowed to go on in the house in the space of another. These day to day issues are what need to be addressed; not the underlying philosophies that lead one to think why one way is acceptable and the other not.

Again, I do not care why you believe the way you do. It may be interesting to discover and revelatory to the individual, but it does not matter in the relationship. What matters is the behavior! When the behaviors are acceptable then the attitudes should be of no concern. Yet, this is exactly where many problems exist. One partner cannot accept the attitude of the other regardless of their acceptable behavior. This is usually the time when the mental health professional is called upon to judge and then push to change the one with the unacceptable attitude. This is where problems arise. This is where families break down. This is where so-called mental health counselors cause more mental harm than good.

It is important that the household run properly. It is important that everything is relatively clean and neat. It is important that everyone be healthy and safe. What more than this does one need? Not really much. Yet, mental health decides to expand the definition of “safe” to include emotional safety. This is merely a buzz word to say, “my way or the highway.” How can I be emotionally safe with a partner who thinks in this certain way and maybe, possibly

some day could do such and such a thing; how can I live with such insecurity? This is defined as mental abuse and cruelty.

In reality, this is nothing other than pure psycho-babble garbage and mental manipulations. This is brainwashing in its purest form. When one claims to be “unsafe,” we should check the locks on the house, assure that the partner has no disposition towards physical violence towards the spouse (this includes the wife towards the husband) and leave it at that. As long as the behavior is proper, then there is no further problem.

The issue of emotional safety is a problem that exists usually because of unresolved anxiety within the individual. This then should be addressed within a healthy context. By healthy, I mean that we must start off with the premise that the problem belongs to the individual and should not be blamed upon the partner or the partners' behavior. One must be told from the start, we do not change others, but we do change ourselves. We can request behavioral changes that have a direct influence upon us, but we cannot go further than that. Mind you, I said we request behavioral changes, we do not impose them; we do not threaten retaliation if and when our ultimatums are not meant. This is not the way of love and certainly not the way to run a relationship.

Every individual is responsible for his or her own character and choices. If one has a problem one can learn simple skills to control the behavior that problem can cause. This is true with regards to almost every character flaw and behavioral issue. Even stress and anxiety can be handled through appropriate techniques that have been used around the world for centuries before there was anything even called mental health.

In the end, I am not a licensed mental health professional. I do not want to be one. This is simply because I disagree with the orientation that the mental health industry takes today. I am a non-interventionist. I do not look to change people. I only seek to assist them find a behavioral pattern that both find acceptable, regardless of whether or not they agree with the reasoning underlying it.

Two human beings in a partnership of marriage need to individually mature to become persons beyond the limitations of their role and sex. In a marriage there no longer is male or female, there are simply two human beings who have taken vows to mutually support and maintain one another. This relationship is the most serious thing in the world. For from this relationship come forth children. These children are the next generation. We are obligated to provide for them stability and nurturing so that they can grow up and become the next generation of responsible adults who will take over and lead this world. How can we expect them to lead when they see us their parents being anything but leaders?

Social problems begin at home. They begin with the individual. Therefore what the individual does is of paramount importance. What they believe is of minimal importance. Learn to focus on behavior and forget about the rest. You will find that this makes for much

greater stability in the home and will definitely save a whole lot of money. Mental health counseling costs a lot of money over the long haul and it very rarely ever is worth the cost.

Mental health counseling often makes matters worse; when it does it is never worth it. Granted, there are some good counselors out there, just as there are a few good used cars. My advice is that before you engage a counselor to counsel you or your family, interview them rigorously to ascertain their personal views, in all social, religious, philosophical and even political matters. Their counsel can never really be free of their personal views. This is only human.

Skip over the counselors who you disagree with in and search for the one, male or female, with whom you can find some common ground. Many counselors can be rather conceited and bloated, who considers themselves overly valuable and self important. I cannot tell you how many times I have met counselors who tell me that they are right in what they think and say simply because they have this fancy diploma on the wall and so many years of experience. That alone, I am told, should prove to us how experienced and thus how right they are. Such an attitude is arrogant and foolish. Dismiss these arrogant windbags out of hand. They will look down at you and tell you all what is wrong with you and how you are sick not accept them. Just smile, say to yourself; “this so-called professional is just an idiot” and move on. Do not bother wasting your time.

If you are in counseling, remember this, you are the boss. The counselor is your employee. Make sure that the counselor does not forget this. If they offend some basic beliefs of yours, or disrespect you or your spouse in any way, treat them as you would any other employee. Fire them on the spot, even in midsession. Let them huff and puff about all that is wrong with you. They are still fired and not getting paid any further. Tell the counselor this and you will be out his/her door in no time. They are not there for you; they are there for the money.

So, if you need help, try talking to a Rabbi or Minister or someone else close to your heart and home. Talk to someone who cares about you as an individual and is not doing this as a business. Do not gossip or bad mouth anyone, especially your spouse. You may not all agree with what you think, but you will find it rather easy to come to an acceptable conclusion what to do. What is done, after all, is all that counts in the end.

Stay simple; stay focused; stay grounded and you will find that these will bring you happiness and fulfillment. This is the secret of a good marriage. This is what marriage counseling should be all about.