



SAGE & SOL THERAPY PRESENTS

Strengthening Your Marriage

A Couples Support Guide

A compassionate, evidence-based resource for couples navigating the challenges and joys of partnership — from everyday communication to healing after betrayal.

Improving Communication	Conflict Resolution
Emotional Intimacy	Holding Space
Pornography Addiction	Healing from Infidelity
Rebuilding Trust	When to Seek Help

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CHAPTER 1

Improving Communication

The foundation of every healthy marriage is the ability to speak — and truly be heard.

Communication is not just about talking — it is about creating shared understanding. Many couples struggle not because they don't care, but because they've developed patterns that block genuine connection. The good news: communication is a learnable skill, and even small changes in how you speak and listen can transform your relationship.

"The biggest communication problem is we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply." — Stephen R. Covey

The Speaker-Listener Technique

- 1 Speaker shares** — Use "I" statements. Speak only for yourself. One point at a time — no monologues.
- 2 Listener paraphrases** — Reflect back: "What I hear you saying is..." No rebuttals, no advice — just listening.
- 3 Speaker confirms or corrects** — "Yes, that's it" or "Not quite — what I meant was..." until the speaker feels understood.
- 4 Switch roles** — Once the speaker feels fully heard, switch. The listener becomes the speaker.

Communication Blockers	Healthy Alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criticizing ("You always...", "You never...") • Stonewalling — shutting down completely • Interrupting to defend or rebut • Assuming negative intent • Bringing up unrelated past grievances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using "I feel..." statements instead • Taking a 20-minute break to self-soothe • Listening to understand, not to win • Asking clarifying questions with curiosity • Staying focused on the present issue only

Daily Connection Practices

<p>The 6-Second Kiss Gottman research shows a daily 6-second kiss maintains both physical and emotional connection throughout the week.</p>	<p>The Daily Check-In Spend 10 minutes each evening sharing one high and one low from your day — no advice, just listening and validating.</p>
<p>Appreciation Statements Share one specific, genuine thing you appreciate about your partner every single day. Specificity matters.</p>	<p>Weekly State of the Union A 30-minute weekly meeting to discuss what's working, what needs attention, and what you're looking forward to together.</p>

When Communication Breaks Down

Even the most skilled communicators have moments when words fail and emotions take over. When this happens, the most important thing is not to push through — it is to pause. Agree in advance on a signal that means "I need a break" — not to avoid the conversation, but to return to it when both partners are regulated and ready to truly listen. The goal is always reconnection, not resolution through sheer persistence.



CHAPTER 2

Conflict Resolution

Conflict is not the enemy of a healthy marriage — contempt is.

Dr. John Gottman's decades of research identified four communication patterns that predict relationship breakdown with over 90% accuracy. He called them the "Four Horsemen." Recognizing these patterns — and actively using their antidotes — is one of the most powerful tools any couple can develop together.

<p>Criticism → Gentle Start-Up Criticism attacks the person. Instead, use a gentle start-up: "I feel unheard when I'm interrupted. Can we try again?" Focus on behavior, not character.</p>	<p>Contempt → Build Appreciation Contempt — eye-rolling, mockery, superiority — is the single strongest predictor of divorce. Counter it daily by actively noticing and naming what you admire.</p>
<p>Defensiveness → Take Responsibility Defensiveness says "It's not my fault." Even 10% ownership breaks the cycle: "You're right, I could have handled that better."</p>	<p>Stonewalling → Physiological Self-Soothing When flooded, your heart rate exceeds 100 bpm and rational thinking shuts down. Take a 20-minute break. Return when calm — not to win, but to reconnect.</p>

Repair Attempts — The Secret Weapon

A repair attempt is any action or statement that de-escalates tension during conflict. They can be simple: "I need a moment," "I'm sorry, let me try again," a gentle touch, or even humor. Couples who use repair attempts successfully — and whose partners receive them — have significantly stronger, more resilient relationships over time.

<p>The 20-Minute Break Protocol</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pause when emotions are above a 7/10 • Set a specific time to return to the topic • Use the break to self-soothe, not rehearse • Write down your feelings during the break 	<p>Returning to the Conversation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin the return with appreciation • Focus on the issue, not the person's character • Use "we" language — you're on the same team • Acknowledge what your partner got right
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Softened Start-Up — How to Begin Difficult Conversations

The way a conversation begins largely determines how it ends. A harsh start-up — beginning with blame, criticism, or contempt — almost always leads to escalation. A softened start-up uses three key elements: describe what you observe without judgment, share how you feel using an "I" statement, and state what you need positively (what you want, not what you don't want). This small shift in approach can transform the entire trajectory of a difficult conversation.

The goal of conflict is not to win — it is to understand. You are always on the same team.



CHAPTER 3

Holding Space & Emotional Intimacy

Intimacy is built in the small, ordinary moments — not just the grand gestures.

Emotional intimacy is the felt sense of being truly known and accepted by your partner — flaws, fears, and all. It requires vulnerability, presence, and the willingness to hold space: to be with your partner in their experience without trying to fix, minimize, or redirect it. This kind of deep attunement is what separates a roommate relationship from a true partnership.

What It Means to Hold Space

<p>Be present, not productive Put down your phone. Make eye contact. Let your partner feel that they have your full, undivided attention — even for just five minutes.</p>	<p>Validate before you advise "That sounds really hard" lands completely differently than "Here's what you should do." Validation first, solutions only if asked.</p>
<p>Ask what they need "What do you need from me right now — to listen, to help problem-solve, or just to be here with you?"</p>	<p>Sit with discomfort You don't have to fix everything. Sometimes the most loving and powerful thing you can do is simply stay present.</p>

The Emotional Bank Account (Gottman)

Every positive interaction — a kind word, a hug, a moment of genuine attention, a laugh together — makes a deposit into your relationship's emotional bank account. Every negative interaction makes a withdrawal. Healthy relationships maintain a **5:1 ratio** of positive to negative interactions. Small, consistent deposits matter far more than occasional grand gestures.

Bids for Connection — The Building Blocks of Intimacy

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Did you see that?" — sharing a moment • "I had the worst day." — seeking comfort • A touch on the shoulder — physical bid • Sharing a funny video — playful bid • "What do you think about...?" — intellectual bid | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turn toward: engage, acknowledge, respond • Turn away: ignore, stay distracted, dismiss • Turn against: criticize, mock, minimize • Goal: notice every bid and respond with warmth • Even a brief "tell me more" is a powerful deposit |
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Deepening Intimacy Through Curiosity

Gottman's research on the "Love Maps" concept reveals that emotionally intelligent couples maintain a rich, detailed map of each other's inner world: their hopes, fears, stressors, dreams, and daily experiences. This map is built through curiosity — asking open-ended questions, staying genuinely interested in your partner's evolving inner life, and updating your understanding as they grow and change. Couples who regularly ask "What's on your mind lately?" or "What's something you've been thinking about?" build a depth of knowing that sustains intimacy through every season of life.

Emotional intimacy is not built in the big moments. It is built in the ten thousand small ones.



CHAPTER 4

Pornography Addiction in Marriage

Understanding the impact, the cycle, and the path toward healing together.

Pornography use exists on a spectrum. When it becomes compulsive — interfering with intimacy, daily functioning, or causing distress to either partner — it requires honest conversation and, often, professional support. The impact on a marriage is real, significant, and deserves to be taken seriously by both partners. Recovery is possible, and many couples emerge stronger.

Impact on the Relationship

- Decreased sexual satisfaction for both partners
- Unrealistic expectations about sex and bodies
- Emotional distance and a culture of secrecy
- The betrayed partner may feel replaced or inadequate
- Avoidance of real intimacy in favor of fantasy
- The using partner often feels deep shame and isolation
- Shame cycles reinforce the behavior rather than stopping it
- Trust erodes steadily when use is hidden or minimized
- Both partners may avoid addressing it out of fear
- Children and family life are often affected over time

The Disclosure Conversation

- 1 Choose the right time** — Not during an argument. Find a calm, private moment when both partners have the capacity to be present.
- 2 Be honest about the full scope** — Partial disclosure causes more harm than full honesty. One complete conversation is better than many partial ones.
- 3 Listen without reacting immediately** — The receiving partner deserves space to process. A therapist can help facilitate this conversation safely.
- 4 Create a recovery plan together** — Accountability structures, clear boundaries, and professional support are all part of sustainable, lasting recovery.

Recommended Resources

Your Brain on Porn by Gary Wilson — explains the neurological impact of pornography use and the science of recovery.

Fortify Program fortifyprogram.org — a free, evidence-based online recovery program for individuals and couples.

Couples Therapy Working with a trauma-informed therapist is strongly recommended for both individual and joint healing.

Recovery is possible. Both partners deserve support — the one struggling with use and the one who has been hurt by it. Many couples emerge from this challenge with deeper honesty, greater vulnerability, and more genuine connection than they had before.



CHAPTER 5

Healing from Infidelity

Betrayal is one of the most painful experiences a marriage can face — and one of the most survivable.

Infidelity — whether emotional, physical, or digital — creates a profound rupture in the marriage. The betrayed partner often experiences symptoms similar to trauma: intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance, difficulty trusting their own perceptions, and waves of grief and rage. Healing is possible, but it requires time, radical honesty, and genuine commitment from both partners.

The Three Stages of Healing (after Janis Abrahms Spring)

- 1 **Crisis & Stabilization** — The immediate aftermath — managing emotional flooding, deciding whether to stay, and establishing basic safety and boundaries for both partners.
- 2 **Understanding & Meaning-Making** — Exploring the conditions that led to the affair — not to excuse it, but to understand what was missing and prevent recurrence.
- 3 **Forgiveness & Rebuilding** — Choosing to move forward — either together or separately — with a new, more honest, more intentional foundation.

What the Betrayed Partner Needs

<p>Full transparency Access to information, honest answers to questions, and no more secrets — even when the truth is painful to share or hear.</p>	<p>Accountability without defensiveness The offending partner takes full responsibility without minimizing, justifying, or shifting blame to the betrayed partner.</p>
<p>Patience with the healing timeline Recovery from infidelity typically takes 2–5 years. Rushing the process or expecting the betrayed partner to "be over it" causes further harm.</p>	<p>Professional support Individual therapy for the betrayed partner, couples therapy together, and possibly peer support groups are all valuable parts of the healing process.</p>

What the Offending Partner Must Do

- 1 **End the affair completely** — All contact with the affair partner must cease — including digital contact. Partial endings prolong the harm and prevent healing from beginning.
- 2 **Be radically honest** — Answer questions truthfully, even when it is painful. Deception and minimization after disclosure cause more damage than the original betrayal.
- 3 **Show consistent remorse** — Remorse is demonstrated through changed behavior over time, not just words or apologies. Actions must align with stated commitment.
- 4 **Seek individual support** — Understanding why the affair happened requires honest self-reflection, often with the help of a therapist, to prevent recurrence.

The question is not only "Can we survive this?" but "What kind of marriage do we want to build from here?"



CHAPTER 6

Rebuilding Trust

Trust is not restored in a single moment — it is rebuilt through thousands of small, consistent actions.

Trust, once broken, can absolutely be rebuilt — but it requires a different kind of intentionality than the trust that existed before. The new trust is earned, not assumed. It is built through consistency, transparency, and the willingness to be accountable over time, even when it is uncomfortable or inconvenient. Both partners play an active role in this process.

The Trust-Building Roadmap

- 1 Radical transparency** — Open access to phone, email, and location — not as punishment, but as a voluntary, ongoing gesture of commitment and respect.
- 2 Consistent follow-through** — Do what you say you will do. Every time. Small promises matter as much as large ones — sometimes more.
- 3 Proactive reassurance** — Don't wait to be asked. Check in. Share your whereabouts. Offer comfort and connection before it's requested.
- 4 Repair quickly** — When you slip — and you will — repair it immediately. Acknowledge what happened, apologize sincerely, and adjust your behavior.
- 5 Celebrate progress** — Notice and name the moments when trust is growing. Expressing gratitude reinforces the new patterns you're building together.

Forgiveness vs. Reconciliation — An Important Distinction

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Forgiveness is a deeply personal process• It is about releasing the burden of resentment• It does not require staying in the relationship• It is for the forgiver's healing, not the offender's benefit• It can take years and is not a single decision | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reconciliation is a relational process• It requires genuine commitment from both partners• It is built on changed behavior, not just words or apologies• It is absolutely possible — but not always the right path• It requires ongoing investment, not just a one-time choice |
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The Role of Time in Trust Repair

Trust cannot be rushed. The partner who broke trust must resist the urge to declare "I've changed" and instead allow the evidence of changed behavior to speak over time. The partner who was hurt must resist the urge to test or punish, and instead learn to receive genuine gestures of repair. Both partners benefit from regular check-ins: "How are we doing? What do you need from me this week?" These conversations, held with openness rather than defensiveness, are the scaffolding on which new trust is built — slowly, steadily, and with intention.

You can reconcile and still be working on forgiveness. You can forgive and still choose to leave. Both are valid, courageous paths.



CHAPTER 7

Additional Topics for Couples

Common challenges that benefit from intentional attention and professional support.

Marriages face many challenges beyond the ones covered in previous chapters. Below are brief overviews of additional areas where couples commonly benefit from intentional focus, honest conversation, and — when needed — professional support.

<p>Financial Conflict Money is one of the top sources of marital stress. Identify your "money stories" and values, create shared goals, and schedule regular, judgment-free financial check-ins.</p>	<p>Parenting Differences Different parenting styles are normal and even healthy. The key is presenting a united front to children while working out differences privately and respectfully.</p>
<p>Sexual Intimacy Desire discrepancy is extremely common and does not mean something is wrong. Open, non-judgmental conversations about needs, frequency, and connection are essential.</p>	<p>In-Law & Family Boundaries Establish clear, loving boundaries together before conflicts arise. Your marriage is its own family unit — protect and prioritize it intentionally.</p>
<p>Growing Apart Couples who grow apart often stopped investing in shared experiences and curiosity about each other. Intentional time together — even briefly — rebuilds connection.</p>	<p>Life Transitions New babies, job loss, illness, relocation, empty nest — transitions strain even the strongest marriages. Normalize the difficulty and seek support early rather than late.</p>

Navigating Perpetual Problems

Gottman's research shows that **69% of marital conflicts are perpetual** — they never fully resolve. These are often rooted in fundamental differences in personality, values, or needs. The goal is not to solve them but to manage them with humor, affection, and acceptance. Couples who thrive are not those who have no conflict — they are those who have learned to fight well and return to connection quickly.

The Importance of Shared Meaning

One of Gottman's most overlooked findings is that couples who build a rich culture of shared meaning — rituals, traditions, goals, and values they hold together — are significantly more resilient through difficult seasons. This can be as simple as a Sunday morning routine, a shared charitable cause, or a yearly tradition that belongs only to the two of you. These shared meanings create a sense of belonging and purpose that anchors the relationship through life's inevitable storms.

Strengthening Your Relationship Proactively

- Schedule regular date nights — protect them
- Create shared rituals of connection
- Pursue a shared goal or project together
- Express gratitude and appreciation daily
- Revisit your relationship vision annually
- Discuss your dreams and long-term hopes openly
- Celebrate milestones and anniversaries intentionally
- Seek support before problems become crises

The couples who thrive are not those without conflict. They are those who have learned to fight well — and to repair even better.



CHAPTER 8

When to Seek Professional Support

Asking for help is one of the most courageous things a couple can do.

Couples therapy is not a last resort — it is a proactive investment in your relationship. Research shows that couples wait an average of **six years** after problems begin before seeking help. Earlier intervention leads to significantly better outcomes. You don't have to be in crisis to benefit from professional support — many couples use therapy as a tune-up, not just a rescue.

Signs That Couples Therapy May Help

- You have the same argument on repeat
- One or both partners feel emotionally disconnected
- There has been infidelity or a significant breach of trust
- Communication has broken down or become hostile
- You're considering separation but want to explore options
- A major life transition has strained the relationship
- One partner struggles with mental health or addiction
- You want to strengthen an already good relationship
- You're preparing for marriage or a major life change
- You feel more like roommates than partners

What to Expect in Couples Therapy

- 1 Initial assessment** — Your therapist meets with you together and sometimes individually to understand your history, patterns, and goals for therapy.
- 2 Identifying cycles** — You'll begin to see the underlying cycles that keep you stuck — not just the surface-level arguments, but the deeper needs and fears driving them.
- 3 Building new skills** — Communication, repair, emotional regulation, and attunement tools are practiced both in session and between sessions.
- 4 Deepening understanding** — You'll explore the underlying needs, attachment wounds, and personal histories that shape how you show up in the relationship.
- 5 Sustaining change** — The goal is not just to feel better in the therapy room — it's to create lasting, meaningful change in your daily life together.

How to Choose the Right Therapist

Not all therapists are trained in couples work, and not all couples therapists use the same approach. Look for a therapist who specializes in couples or relational therapy, uses an evidence-based model (such as Gottman Method, Emotionally Focused Therapy, or EMDR for trauma), and creates a space where both partners feel equally heard and respected. It is completely appropriate to ask a potential therapist about their training, approach, and experience with issues similar to yours before committing. A good therapeutic fit is one of the strongest predictors of positive outcomes.

Ready to take the next step? Schedule a free consultation with Natalie Ellis, DSW, LCSW-QS sagesoltherapy.com | natalie@sagesoltherapy.com Book online: sagesoltherapy.clientsecure.me/request/service



Affirmations for Couples

Read these aloud together, or keep them somewhere you'll see them daily. Words shape the stories we tell about our relationships — and ourselves.

"We choose each other — again and again, in the ordinary moments and the hard ones."

"Our differences make us stronger when we approach them with curiosity instead of contempt."

"We are allowed to struggle and still be deeply, genuinely in love."

"Repair is always possible when both of us are willing to show up."

"We are building something that will outlast any single argument or season of difficulty."

"I see you. I hear you. I am here — and I am not going anywhere."

"Our marriage is worth fighting for — and worth learning to fight well."

"We grow stronger not by avoiding hard conversations, but by having them with love."

"Connection is a daily practice, and we choose to practice it together."

"We are not perfect. We are committed. That is enough."

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