



How to Tell When It's Time for Family Counseling

If your family can't seem to get along in any situation, it may be time to seek professional help

Written by Wendy Clark

Kathy and Tom argue each time the credit card bill arrives; usually in front of their children, Sam and Laney. They in turn think this is the normal way to have a conversation and often get in trouble at school for speaking to teachers and students in the same manner. Fighting in front of your children, placing blame on each other, and never agreeing on anything are all signs that your family might need counseling. Katy experts weigh in on what often causes conflicts and some of the warning signs of when you should seek help.

Getting Ahead of the Curve

Kelly Peyton, LPC, RPT, CCPT at West Houston Counseling Center explains that certain life events can be triggers for emotional or communicative discord. "There are many reasons people seek therapy - various life changes like moving, adoptions, new babies, new marriages, and caring for a sick family member are all valid reasons," Peyton says. Professional sessions can include family members of all ages, and even children as young as infants can benefit from play-based therapy. Additionally, substance abuse, abusive or combative behavior, and mental illness can all be reasons a family might seek therapy. In these more sensitive situations, Peyton recommends automatically considering family counseling to help relatives in learning how to avoid villainizing the person struggling with their serious issues. Recognizing the potential for a certain situation to cause undue stress on family life is often the first positive step toward healing.

Warning Signs

According to the Gottman Institute, a research-based organization dedicated to improving familial relationships, there are four warning signs that communication is breaking down: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and a refusal to communicate. Dr. Mary Lyles of Katy Family Counseling says that deficiencies in these four areas signify that changes are needed, and that through family counseling, "new ways of communication can be learned to increase emotional and psychological safety for each family member." Further, she states that "professional help can provide more information and skills on how to improve communication and move toward a loving, emotionally close relationship in which each partner feels respected and loved."

Coming out of the Shadows

Even well into the 21st century, there is still a stigma in the U.S. surrounding counseling and mental health services. Because of this, it can be hard to get every family member on board with a family therapy program. Dr. Lyles shares, "Using therapy to learn more about yourself and your partner, how automatic thoughts and behaviors play into a relationship, and to improve communication skills can contribute to the well-being of your family." Peyton sees resistance sometimes in her practice. "Typically, pushback comes from other family members who might not want to be a part of the affected member's treatment. I like to tell them that therapy gives their family a chance to grow closer to each other, and it provides stability for their family."

Why Counseling Is a Good Idea

Once you pinpoint factors that indicate your family needs a little professional help, the next step is actually reaching out. There are great benefits to family counseling. "Really, you gain a little emotional intelligence," Peyton explains. "You learn regulation of emotions and develop a better understanding of yourself and your family's communication style." Dr. Lyles states, "Family counseling offers an opportunity to improve interactions between people in close relationships, and can help people understand their own habitual thoughts and behaviors."

Counting the Cost

Because many counselors don't take insurance, or insurance companies offer little to no reimbursement for mental health services, finances can play a huge role in determining whether a family will choose to seek help. One suggestion Peyton has for people in this situation is to seek out faith-based counseling services. For example, some churches offer help on a pro bono basis, or have a sliding scale fee that takes into account the family's income when calculating hourly rates. Local families are encouraged to reach out to area churches and speak with someone involved with social ministry or family enrichment programs, which sometimes also offer parenting or communication classes. It doesn't matter how you get help for your family, just know that you are headed in the right direction when you take the first step and make the decision to seek help. **KM**



When to Change Counselors

If your counselor...

- Talks too much, or not at all
- Is overly confrontational with any member of your family
- Encourages blaming of particular family members
- Isn't interested in the goals your family wants to accomplish
- Training and credentials don't match with your family's needs
- Fees and policies are not communicated by administrative assistant before the first session
- Not being sensitive to your beliefs or background
- Initiates any type of physical touch without your consent

To find out more about options for family therapy, visit katymagazine.com.