

The Problem Is My Partner: Treating Couples When One Partner Wants the Other to Change

Kieran T. Sullivan
Santa Clara University

Joanne Davila
Stony Brook University

Partners commonly present to couple therapy expecting that the relationship will only improve if their partner changes. In other words, the partner is the problem. In this article, the authors review research on people's capacity for change, the process of behavior change, and personality change, especially the role of attachment theory. They then review techniques for working with couples based on empirically validated approaches to couple therapy and general change principles in therapy. Finally, the authors present a case study and recommendations for working with change-demanding couples, emphasizing the importance of focusing on emotional acceptance.

Keywords: couple therapy, change, acceptance

Clinicians who work with couples are faced with a variety of challenging problems and couple dynamics. Perhaps one of the most difficult (and common) is when one partner has identified the source of the problem as being located in the other and is demanding that the partner change. In this article, we address the question, What do we as therapists do when one partner is insisting on change in the other? In line with the goals of this special section, we discuss basic psychological research that bears on the answer, with the goal of providing direction for intervention, as well as identifying questions in need of research.

The Problem

"I want my partner to change! If she/he was different, everything would be better and I would be happy!" This is what we hear from numerous couple members. Therefore, the problem is the desire for *partner change*, but what does partner change really mean for couples?

Often partners have identified a specific behavior they would like changed. This might be a habit that bothers them, like making plans without consulting the other person. It might be related to the division of household tasks, the way their partners communicate, health behaviors, levels of intimacy, spending more time together, or providing more emotional support. Indeed, research shows that such requests are among the most common problems that couple therapists see: communication, power struggles, unrealistic expectations of partner, demonstrations of affection, sex, money-management, serious individual problems, and household management (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997).

Partners also often identify personality styles or other individual characteristics they want changed. They may complain that their partner is too emotional or neurotic or too cold and dismissive. They may be unhappy with their partner's depression, anxiety, or anger and how their partner expresses and manages those feelings. They may see their partner as too needy and demanding or too distant and self-sufficient. Indeed, there are many personal characteristics that people label as character flaws in their partners that they would like changed.

Of course, personal characteristics and specific behaviors can go hand in hand. Partners regularly say things like, "I want my partner to spend more time with me, but she/he won't because she/he's a cold, distant person with no

Kieran T. Sullivan, Department of Psychology, Santa Clara University; Joanne Davila, Department of Psychology, Stony Brook University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kieran Sullivan, Department of Psychology, Santa Clara University, 500 El Camino Real Santa Clara, CA 95053-0333. E-mail: ksullivan@scu.edu