

Therapeutic Separations

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If your relationship still has viability, if it feels like it's still worth fighting for, then it is worth it to leave no stone unturned in deciding whether to stay or go. If you are in a marriage, the stakes are even higher, and higher still if children are involved.

Sometimes the best way to get the necessary clarity on which to base a decision to stay in or leave a relationship is for both partners to take some time and space apart. This affords the opportunity to reflect, to feel, and to experience what it's like to be apart from the other. I call this taking of time and space a *therapeutic separation*. To maximize the odds of a successful therapeutic separation it's important that an agreement be reached between the partners defining the terms and clarifying the shared expectations of the separation.

Terms to Consider in a Therapeutic Separation Agreement:

1. Goals of the separation. Why are we doing this? What do we hope to gain? What needs to change? What are our fears, concerns, hopes and needs? Do we want less conflict? More intimacy? Better communication? How will we determine or measure whether the separation has been successful? Is this something only one partner wants, or both? If driven by the need of only one partner, how is the other partner handling and understanding the separation?

2. Type of separation. Will this be simply a physical separation, a psychological separation, or (ideally) both? I.e., will the partners be doing work on themselves? Will the separation be facilitated by a third party in any way? Will they be or are they already in therapy? Will they be in couples counseling? Or will they simply be "taking space"? Will it be brief, like a short solo vacation, or of greater duration? Will they live separately or live under the same roof? Do we need a written agreement? If so should it be negotiated with and/or drafted by a mediator or therapist?

3. Duration. How long will the separation last? On what basis should a decision about this be made?

4. Communication. Will there be any communication between the parties during the separation? If so, what are the limitations and expectations? Will there be periodic "check-ins"? How handle holidays or birthdays that occur during the separation?

5. Dating. Okay to date other people or not? Are we or are we not going to have sex with each other during the separation?

6. Confidentiality. What is okay to tell our friends and family about what we're doing and why?

7. In-house rules. If the partners will continue to live under the same roof, what are the rules of engagement? Who will sleep where? Sex or no sex? Time schedule for who is where when? How handle household responsibilities and chores, such as cleaning, cooking, shopping, etc.? Should there be a dispute resolution provision?

8. Child care. If children, how will child care be dealt with? Will children travel back and forth between Mom's house and Dad's house? If staying under the same roof, who will be the on-duty parent when? What will the children be told about what's happening, and why?

9. Finances. What will be the financial agreements necessary to make the separation work?

10. Modifications. Can the terms of this agreement be modified during the course of the separation? E.g., one partner's goals for the separation evolve and change during the separation; one partner wants to extend the separation at the expiration of the term of duration; one partner wants to shorten the duration because they've already achieved the clarity they'd hoped for; or one partner wants to date someone else. As no unilateral changes should be made, under what terms can we have mid-stream renegotiations without undermining our goals for the separation?

11. Lawyers. Will we run this agreement by our own lawyers? If we have children do we want a formal legal agreement, e.g., one that clarifies that our separation will have no precedential value and will not be construed as abandonment in any future legal proceeding?

12. Coming back together. How do we want to handle our reuniting? A ritual? Should our coming back together be facilitated by a third party (e.g., a therapist or mediator)? What would we want to discuss, establish or clarify? How can we best share with each other what we've learned? What new commitments do we want to make to ourselves and our partner? What new commitments do we need from our partner? What are we no longer willing to tolerate? What kind of ongoing therapeutic work will we do, individually and/or together? Should we do a "trial reunion" under clearly delineated terms? How do we avoid falling back into our old unsatisfying or destructive patterns? Should we try a gradual re-entry into relationship? On what terms?