Soothing therapy tensions [1]

Dear Alice,

My partner gets nervous every time I see my psychotherapist because she doesn't like the idea of me talking about our relationship. For her, it's anxiety-producing because she fears there are things I tell my therapist that I don't tell her. For me, it's anxiety-producing because I feel like my therapy sessions should be a safe and confidential space for me and because I feel like having that space has made our relationship better overall. How can I assuage her fears and anxieties without feeling like I have to, a) tell her everything I say in therapy, or b) lie and say that she doesn't come up?

Answer

Dear Reader,

The healthiest relationships are those in which each person has her/his own private space as well as the intimate space they share with a partner. Your partner may not understand your need for privacy regarding your therapy sessions or she may feel threatened by it. However, it is legitimate and important for you to protect your individual self and there are ways you can help your partner to understand and become comfortable with this need.

First, you should establish firm boundaries with your partner regarding your therapy. Although this may feel awkward at first, boundary setting ? even in the most intimate of relationships ? allows people to become more self-confident, communicate more openly and honestly, and foster their partner?s well-being. Acknowledge to your partner that yes, while she and your relationship do come up in therapy, therapy is ultimately an opportunity for you to explore and reflect on your individual feelings, concerns, and hopes. This time is most effective because of its protected and private nature. Explaining these ideas and feelings may help ease your partner?s nervousness.

Second, your partner may feel insecure about herself and your relationship because you sometimes discuss your relationship in therapy. Some people worry about being discussed when not present. Being understanding of these feelings, supporting your partner to gain confidence, being emotionally available to her, and building trust in your relationship will all help curb the anxiety your partner feels when you see your psychotherapist. When she expresses distress over your therapy sessions, talk through both of your emotions together and reassure her that she has no reason to doubt your relationship. It may also useful to share your feeling that having privacy in your therapy sessions has helped strengthen your relationship. Be sure to respond to her concerns sensitively and encourage her to pursue her
own activities and interests so she can also grow and develop her own individuality.

If you aren’t able to assuage your partner’s worries by yourself, you may want to encourage her to see a therapist too? this way, she can talk through her fears and anxieties and possibly gain insight into why you want your own time in therapy to be confidential. If she is a Columbia student, she can contact Counseling and Psychological Services [2] (Morningside) or Mental Health Services [3] (CUMC) to make an appointment.

Congrats on seeking ways to support yourself and also be supportive of your partner. Hopefully this information helps you and your partner find the right balance.

Alice!
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Relationship Stuff [8]
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