Should We Stay, Leave, or Renegotiate?

> **Read the article first.** This worksheet accompanies *Should We Stay Together? How to Ask for the Couples Counseling We Actually Need* at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com. Search "should we stay together" on the site to find it.

Couples counseling does four different jobs: helping us decide, helping us repair, helping us grow a relationship that is already good, and helping us with what comes after a decision. This sheet is for the first job. Each partner fills in a separate copy, alone, before comparing. The point is not to reach the decision on paper. It is to find out which question each of us is actually carrying, so the first session can start there.

WHERE I STAND
Say it before softening it

We mark where we are today, not where we hope to be or where we think our partner needs us to be. Unsure is a complete answer.

THE QUESTION UNDERNEATH
Several questions wear one coat

Deciding whether to stay is usually several questions at once: whether we want our partner to be the person who calms us, how much work that would take, whether we are willing to change, what we expect a marriage to provide, what leaving would cost, whether we fit, and whether we share an ethics.

> *Which of these is the one I keep circling?*

COMPARING
Different answers are the work

If we are in different places, that difference is the first thing to say out loud in counseling. Ordinary relationship work started on top of an unspoken split makes the split worse.

WHAT TO ASK FOR
Name the job

The last page turns this into one sentence we can hand a counselor. If the session immediately starts solving a different problem, we return to that sentence.

A WORKED EXAMPLE, FROM THE ARTICLE

WHERE ONE PARTNER STANDS	"I do not know whether I want to stay."
WHERE THE OTHER STANDS	"I want to stay, and I am sure."
THE QUESTION UNDERNEATH	For the unsure partner: the relationship has become the trigger. Coming home makes the day harder, not easier.
HOW MUCH WORK	Years of resentment. Reversing it means new experiences repeated long enough to become believable.
WHAT TO ASK FOR	"We are not ready to work on attachment because one of us has not decided whether to stay. We need help with that first."

William Hambleton Bishop, MA, LPC, LMFT

Where I stand today

Check the one that is closest. Then a few words on what makes it true.

- ☐ I want to stay, and I am sure.
- ☐ I want to stay, nothing is broken, and I want the relationship to grow.
- ☐ I want to leave, and I am sure.
- ☐ I do not know whether I want to stay.
- ☐ I want to stay, but not in the relationship as it currently is.
- ☐ Leaving is not practically possible for us, and the relationship as it stands is not meeting enough of my needs.

WHAT MAKES THAT TRUE FOR ME RIGHT NOW

QUESTION 1
Do I want my partner to be the person who calms me?

In a secure relationship, coming home makes the stresses of life easier to carry. For many couples it has become the opposite: the relationship itself is the trigger.

- ☐ Coming home helps
- ☐ Coming home makes it harder
- ☐ It depends on the day

QUESTION 2
How much work would it take?

The degree of injury is proportional to the work required to reverse it. Resentment, distrust, and the expectation that the next interaction will match the last hundred all have to be worn down by new experience.

- ☐ A season of effort
- ☐ A year or more
- ☐ I cannot see the far side of it

QUESTION 3
Am I willing to change?

Wanting the relationship to feel different while requiring ourselves to remain the same is not a workable arrangement. What would I have to grow into, relationally and individually?

The question underneath

A few words each. Leave blank what does not apply.

QUESTION 4

What do I expect a marriage to provide?

Attachment, friendship, sex, co-parenting, money, play, conversation, meaning. Which of these am I asking this relationship to carry, and which could legitimately be met elsewhere?

QUESTION 5

What would leaving cost?

Two households, the children's schools, retirement, health insurance, property, the people around us. The practical cost is a real variable, not a failure of nerve.

QUESTION 6

Do we fit?

Love and compatibility are different things. Is the difference between us a capacity that could grow, or a difference in what each of us needs a life to be?

- ☐ Could grow
- ☐ Will not change
- ☐ I do not know yet

QUESTION 7

Do we share an ethics?

Arguments about politics, religion, or other people are often an indirect way of asking whether we agree on what is right and what a life is for.

- ☐ Mostly shared
- ☐ Drifting apart
- ☐ I no longer know

THE ONE I KEEP CIRCLING

Of the seven, which question is the real one for me?

William Hambleton Bishop, MA, LPC, LMFT

Comparing, and naming the job

Compare copies. Neither copy is the correct one.

WHERE WE STAND

Our two answers from page two, side by side.

ME:

YOU:

IF THEY DIFFER, WHAT THAT DIFFERENCE ASKS OF US:

WHICH JOB ARE WE ASKING FOR?

Check one. Combinations are normal, so check the one that has to come first.

- ☐ Deciding. At least one of us does not know whether to stay. We need help with that before anything else.
- ☐ Repairing. We both want to stay, something has been injured, and we need help changing the relationship and ourselves.
- ☐ Growing. Nothing is broken. We love each other and want a better relationship, or one built for the chapter we are entering.
- ☐ Leaving well. We have decided, and we need help separating with the least damage.
- ☐ Renegotiating. We are staying, and the marriage cannot be responsible for everything it is currently asked to carry.

THE SENTENCE WE WILL BRING TO THE FIRST SESSION

In our own words. A counselor can then tell us whether that is work they know how to do.

Discernment is a question at the top of the decision, and then again inside every branch of it. There are companion sheets for repairing, growing, leaving well, and renegotiating.

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