Soothing therapy tensions

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,

Some of the healthiest romantic relationships are those in which each person has their own private space as well as the intimate space they share with their 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 healthy for you to protect this personal time. To that end, there are ways you can help your partner to understand and become more comfortable with this need. How you ask? It's all about communication! Consider the following ideas:

- **Consider bringing your concerns up in therapy.** You don't have to figure this out alone. It sounds like you are regularly attending therapy and discussing your relationship in those sessions. Your therapist will be able to help you communicate your needs to your partner.
- **Take time for some self-reflection.** Before you chat with your partner, take some time to think. What topics do you want to keep between you and your therapist and why? What might you be comfortable sharing with your partner at this time, and what might change in the future? How has being in therapy helped you? How has it helped your relationship? Are these things you feel comfortable sharing with your partner? Doing this prior to engaging in a conversation may help you have your thoughts in order.
- **Establish firm boundaries regarding your therapy.** Although this may feel awkward at first, boundary setting?even in the most intimate of relationships?can allow you to become more self-confident, and communicate more openly and honestly. This may mean establishing a boundary where you share some of what happens in therapy or nothing at all. By establishing these together, both of you will have an understanding of what the boundaries look like and mean. Keep in mind that boundaries may change or
shift over time and can be renegotiated. Try creating check-ins with your partner to determine whether or not the boundaries you've both established are working, or whether they need to be adjusted.

- **Be open and honest.** Acknowledge to your partner that yes, while she and your relationship may come up sometimes, therapy isn't a venting session; it's ultimately an opportunity for you to explore and reflect on your individual feelings, concerns, and hopes so that you can be the healthiest version of yourself. This time may be effective to that end because of its protected and private nature. Explaining these ideas and feelings may help ease your partner’s nervousness.

- **Let her know how you feel therapy has helped.** If being in therapy has helped your relationship, it may be helpful to tell your partner that and maybe give a little insight about how it helps to strengthen your relationship.

- **Be empathetic.** Your partner may still feel insecure about herself and your relationship because you sometimes discuss your relationship in therapy. Sometimes people worry when they’re talked about when they’re not there. Talk through both of your emotions together. Listening to and validating her feelings, supporting your partner, being emotionally available to her, and building trust in your relationship might help curb some of the anxiety your partner feels when you see your psychotherapist.

If after you talk you aren’t able to assuage your partner’s worries by yourself, you may consider encouraging her to see a therapist too or invite her to one of the sessions with your current therapist? this way, she can talk through her fears and anxieties and possibly gain insight into what therapy is like in general. You could also consider looking into couples counseling if that is something that would interest both of you.

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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Resources

- Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
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