Setting Goals in Couples Therapy

It's not always intuitive to do this. Our natural tendency is to protect our ego and focus on what others are doing. This exercise invites you to turn inward with curiosity and compassion, not criticism.

1. What kind of relationship do you want to be in?

Think of this as the *target*, the deeper reason you're together.
Examples:

- "A relationship where I feel safe and emotionally connected."
- "A partnership where we can laugh and repair after conflict."
- "A team where we support each other's growth."
- "A relationship that feels respectful, steady, and collaborative."

2. What will help you move toward that vision?

Most of us want positive change without too much discomfort, but meaningful relationships grow through many small, intentional moments. We make daily choices that support connection.

Examples include:

- pausing before reacting
- speaking with kindness even when stressed
- showing appreciation
- being thoughtful with tone and timing
- checking in during hard situations
- trying to understand your partner's perspective before responding

What qualities or efforts will support you in creating the relationship you want?

3. What internal obstacles make this harder at times?

Be honest but gentle with yourself.

Examples:

- “I get defensive when I feel criticized.”
- “When I’m overwhelmed, I shut down instead of sharing.”
- “I tend to interpret things personally even when it’s not about me.”
- “I seek to be understood before I’m ready to understand.”
- “I avoid conflict even when something needs to be said.”

Everyone has patterns that get in the way. Naming them helps you work with them, not against them.

4. Think of a difficult or sensitive topic you’d like to talk about.

Now, consider what you sometimes do in those moments that doesn’t help the conversation move forward.

Examples of less effective behaviors might include:

- getting defensive or raising your voice
- shutting down or withdrawing
- giving in quickly to avoid tension
- becoming sarcastic
- blaming or criticizing
- going passive and then feeling resentful later
- changing the subject

This is not about blaming yourself, just noticing patterns you’re open to shifting.

5. How do you aspire to be in that moment instead?

This is a chance to practice the traits you want to grow. And the bonus is that what you learn here can support you in every relationship you have.

Examples:

- listening with patience
- taking a breath before responding
- speaking from vulnerability rather than frustration
- asking clarifying questions
- using “I” statements
- staying curious instead of assuming intentions
- expressing needs calmly

These are skills that take practice, and each attempt counts.

6. What do you need to learn to support that aspiration?

You might need tools for emotional regulation, communication, or grounding.

Examples:

- “I want to learn to pause before reacting.”
- “I need strategies for calming my nervous system during conflict.”
- “I want to understand my partner’s communication style better.”
- “I need to learn how to name emotions instead of suppressing them.”

Learning these skills is a sign of strength, not deficiency.

7. What is your level of motivation to grow in these ways?

Rate yourself from 1 to 100.
This number helps you understand your current readiness.

Examples:

- 30: “I see the value but feel overwhelmed.”
- 60: “I’m motivated but still nervous to try new things.”
- 85: “I want this and feel ready to work on it.”

Lower motivation is normal. It simply means you may need more support, patience, or clarity before change feels easier.

8. What habits or emotional patterns might you need to gently let go of in order to grow?

Examples:

- assuming the worst
- expecting yourself (or your partner) to be perfect
- stonewalling or shutting down
- taking everything personally
- holding onto resentment
- avoiding tough conversations
- catastrophizing

Letting go doesn’t mean eliminating these, it means softening their grip over time.

9. What are the vulnerable feelings underneath your less effective behaviors?

When you're at your worst, what do you tend to do?

Examples of less effective behaviors:

- raising your voice
- making cutting comments
- withdrawing
- going into fix-it mode
- shutting down emotionally
- keeping score

Examples of vulnerable feelings underneath:

- fear of being rejected
- shame
- sadness
- feeling unimportant
- fear of conflict
- feeling overwhelmed

Examples of new behaviors you'd like to try:

- taking a timeout and returning with intention
- naming the vulnerable feeling instead of acting from it
- staying in the conversation but slowing it down
- validating your partner before sharing your perspective
- asking for reassurance when needed

Connecting the dots between *what you do*, *what you feel*, and *what you aspire to do* helps transform reactivity into connection.