

You Chose Option A...

You have three free counseling sessions through work and you make an appointment for you and Josh. When you first tell him about it, he's annoyed. When you start crying and say you don't know what else to do, he agrees to attend one session with you.

Five minutes into the counseling session, you remember what a smooth-talker your husband can be. He says you've been neglectful of his needs and doesn't understand why you're so uninterested in him. He also says that he feels hurt that you do not want to have another child. You say that you're always working on being the best wife you can be, but there's no excuse for forcing himself on you. I agree, the counselor says, but it takes two to make a marriage work, and you both play a role. You can't expect the marriage to be successful if you don't meet each other's needs. She says that improving your communication may help you feel closer and gives you some exercises to try at home.

All in all, you feel the session was helpful. You're confused about what better communication has to do with Josh being emotionally, physically and sexually abusive to you, but you're inclined to trust the professional opinion of your counselor. Plus you're happy that Josh was willing to go in the first place and feel hopeful that it was a step in the right direction. Josh even agrees to sign up for another session before leaving. Though, when you get home he tells you how angry he is that you would share such personal things with a stranger and that you made him out to be a rapist. In retaliation, Josh pushes you to the ground and kicks while yelling about how tired he is of the way you treat him.

A Follow Up from Emerge:

This story highlights the dynamics of what rape in a relationship (married or not) can look like in the context of domestic abuse. When coercion and abuse is present, it can be very unsafe emotionally and physically for a person experiencing abuse to tell their partner that they don't want to have sex. As a result, they may not identify that what is happening in their relationship is rape, especially when there wasn't a physical struggle or an outright statement of "no." Feeling unsafe to say no or saying yes out of fear is not the same as giving consent.

Identifying abuse in a relationship can be difficult and confusing, and it's common for friends, family and survivors to believe that relationship counseling will help address the problem. If someone tells you that they feel unsafe in their relationship (physically or emotionally), it is important to ask how you can best support them. We may not always know the full context of a situation. Often, saying that you believe the survivor and asking about their safety are the most important things we can do in addition to sharing community resources with them. When there are coercion and power dynamics present, relationship counseling is not likely to address the abuse happening and in some instances may create greater safety risks.

It's possible for a survivor to feel a false sense of safety in a counseling session, which could cause them to disclose things to a therapist that put them in danger at a later time. When a person chooses to use abuse and/or violence in their relationship, it's important that they first get help to address the underlying beliefs about relationships and power that are informing their choices and behaviors. If their beliefs are not addressed first, it's unlikely that they will be able to peacefully and respectfully engage in listening to their partner's needs.

Josh's abuse and violence toward Stephanie are not the result of poor communication, but rather his inability to respect his partner and honor her wishes when they conflict with his own. He chooses to use abuse and violence as a way to coerce Stephanie and maintain his control.

[Click here to see what would have happened if you would have chosen to stay with your parents.](#)