

Pre-Marital Strategy Paper

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February 21, 2023

My pre-marital class would be broken into five sessions, once a week on a week night, with each session being no longer than one and a half hours in length. The first session is an introductory session where we would get to know one another. I would introduce my husband and talk about our backgrounds, careers, family, kids, grandkids, and how long we have been married. I would ask questions about how they met, how long they have known each other, are they engaged, if there is a wedding date set, and what they hope to get out of the class. In this first session, I would like to discuss what content we would be covering in each of the five sessions such as: Expectations, Communication, Money, Conflicts and Fighting, and Intimacy (Sexual and Spiritual).

Lastly, I would go over basic ground rules for the sessions, and ask them what expectations they have for the class. Ground rules are my expectations I have for them. I would clarify what homework or exercises I would want them to complete before each class. I would explain that interaction and participation is encouraged, so they can feel free to interrupt with questions and comments. One of my ground rules would include the matter of sexual purity before marriage. In the past, one couple we counseled was living together. We encouraged them to set a time before the marriage to abstain from sexual intercourse to re-establish the purity aspect of their relationship and future marriage. Because of my own belief that a marriage is between a man and a woman, I would need to refer a gay couple to another counseling center or colleague. Other reasons to terminate the counseling sessions would be missed sessions without notice, repeated lateness to sessions, addictions such as drug abuse, eating disorders, or physical abuse. I would explain these issues are beyond my expertise, and I would refer them to someone that deals with these specific areas.

The purpose of expectations is how to navigate through a future marriage or whether you should marry at all. In the session on Expectations, I would explore the idea that the more you know your fiancé, the smoother the adjustment to marriage will be. The more you know each other the better; no surprises. First, I would explain, it is good to do an evaluation of should we get married. The dealbreakers might include:

- o Substance abuse problems or addictions
- o Past traumas that they are dealing with on an ongoing basis such as: PTSD from past military service or past sexual abuse.
- o Past family experiences: were your parents divorced, were your parents a gay couple, or were you adopted.
- o Past sexual history: How many partners have you had and more importantly are there still ongoing connections to past partners or soul ties.

I would want to also address Future family expectations:

- o How many children do you want to have or should we have children at all?
- o Should we send our children to private or Christian schools
- o How much extended family involvement do you anticipate having. Frequency of seeing the in-laws and parents.

Religious expectations such as:

- o How important is your faith, and if you marry someone of a different faith under which faith will you raise your children.

- o How important is it to attend church and how many times per week. How important it is to belong to a church community.

How well do your life goals and purpose align?

- o Do you have a missionary calling or do you prefer to live in the States? How important is it to live near family?
- o Do you want to be financially secure and live in a nice house in a good neighborhood or are you committed to raising support, working with the poor, and want to live in a poorer area?

Unconscious Roles and Unconscious Rules need to be addressed because many are from our Family of Origin and are so ingrained in our DNA that we think it's a universal truth.

- o Responsibilities in the home such as chores and cleaning, and is there a primary caregiver for the children or are these responsibilities shared.
- o Holidays- where will they be spent or how will the time be divided. For example, my family always for Christmas and your family for Christmas eve.
- o Financial expectations: Are you a spender or saver? Family of Origin Philosophy on money. Feelings on accruing debt and use of credit cards. How much discussion should be given to the spending of big-ticket items and informing your partner before the purchase not asking after the purchase.
- o Family of Origin expectations on family such as: Sundays are for family, Mother and mother -in-law roles. How much involvement with the grandchildren.

I would implement homework from the workbook of, *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*, as Exercise one that covers Your Personal Ten Commandments (rules that are ingrained) and Exercise two on Making Your Roles Conscious which covers division of responsibilities within Marriage and expectations from our FOO. Both exercises are excellent for giving a couple insight and discussing above mentioned points.

Session two would be on Communication. I would begin with the Gottman study on listening to your mate and responding in what Gottman terms bidding. A bid is something your partner mentions as a topic of conversation. Gottman's study showed it is important to turn towards your partner and make a remark back about what they just said. The turning toward is showing with your body language that you are interested and attentive to what they are saying. It seems so fundamental but after a couple years of marriage a communication breakdown can happen where one person doesn't respond at all (passive) or responds negatively to the bid (Why are you bothering me about something I have no interest in! -active aggressive). Those Gottman termed the Disasters. The Master's responded positively and turned toward their partner with a positive comment (a nod and a smile- passive constructive) or a positive comment (how interesting I wasn't aware of that. -active constructive). This study was a predictor of divorce in the negative responses to bids. After talking about this study, I would like to emphasize how important it is to use reflective listening to let your partner know you are listening, have heard and understood what they said, and are nurturing a safe environment to share your interests and dreams. In class we learned that validation is so important and is not just agreeing. Validation is letting your partner know by saying back to them by reiterating in your own words what they just said. I would implement the workbook exercises thirteen and

fifteen for this session. Thirteen deals with how well you are communicating honestly with your partner and fifteen talks about understanding how your partner feels and interpreting what's really going on behind his statements. We learned that fifty-five percent of communication is non-verbal so if touch is one of your partner's love languages this would be vital for healthy communication. I thought it was clever how the book brought out the use of I (non-threatening) statements instead of you (accusatory) statements. Example: "I wish we would pray more together." rather than, "You never pray with me." It makes such a difference in how the statement is perceived. It is crucial in your relationship to build trust, empathy, caring, and understanding. During this time, I would have them practice assertive speaking/active listening, encouraging them it will feel more natural with practice.

Session Three would be on Money. In the book I believe money is covered under conflicts. I would use the questionnaire from the workbook exercise nineteen. It deals with your spending habits, and how you handle your finances. Since it is what couples quarrel most about, and the top reason for divorce, I would want a session that focused just on money. When we facilitated the money session for pre-marital class for church couples, we created a game to start the session. It was called, Money Expectations test. It stated give your estimate of what you would pay for the items listed below. The twelve items listed were in order: a women's business suit, a men's business suit, a week's vacation, a woman's handbag, a month's groceries, a couch, auto purchase, Christmas gift budget, a wedding gift, anniversary gift, hosting dinner for a guest couple, retirement savings or savings per year. Each person answers the value of each item. Then you figure out the difference in each couple's estimate as a way to understand expectations. Whoever has the smallest difference of the couples wins a prize. The

prize was usually a Starbucks card valued at ten to twenty dollars (the amount depended on who was buying the card, me or Barry). The practical discussions points in the session would include:

- o Budget (50/30/20 rule) (50-fixed,30-savings,20-variable)
- o Debt what is your tolerance. Debt over credit cards or house loans.
- o Retirement planning and Estate Planning
- o Investments. How do you feel about stock market or municipal bonds
- o Savings for needs- car, vacation, education fund, emergency fund, support of parents in old age
- o Coupons, turn off lights, turn down furnace/AC
- o Tithing- what percentage Gross or Net income
- o Tipping- what percentage
- o Money secrets/ hidden bank accounts known only to one partner
- o Bankruptcy
- o Insurance
- o Children savings accounts/ allowances
- o Bill paying / multiple accounts or one account
- o Borrowing money from friends/family

Another area to touch on is attitudes about money. We made up a list of our beliefs surrounding money and finances:

- o Always celebrate victories so that you emphasize to your children that your family matters more than money. Live life richly with an attitude of abundance. Never talk about financial troubles in front of the children unless it is a matter of faith, believing.
- o The Lord owns everything and you are the stewards. Never be poor in your attitude about money. Be generous while being frugal/responsible. Best philosophy is to hold onto possessions and wealth with an open hand.
- o Never feel victimized by God or man by a lack of money. Adjust to financial changes both good and bad. Have adaptability. (Be content in whatever situation-abase and abound. Phil 4:11-13)
- o A man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife. Create new financial expectations apart from the hindrances and influences of your family preconceptions.
- o Having money isn't evil; the love of money is. You can't serve two masters. -You have money or money has you. It is a matter of Lordship.
- o Never spend principal only interest, make progress with finances for a legacy through generations.
- o If you can't be trusted with finances you cannot be trusted with real riches. "If you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches?" (Luke 16:11)

Lastly, we always offered to help couples set up a budget in a private meeting if they didn't already have one. The book offers a great outline resource for this as well.

In Session Four I would like to cover the subject of Conflicts and, “How to Fight the Good Fight”. I would begin with having them complete exercise eighteen to identify what their hot topics are as a couple. This will bring a self-awareness on where to tread carefully in handling their arguments over these issues. Dr Gottman has identified four areas that are key in understanding marital breakdown. He coined these areas, “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”. These are four destructive tendencies that can progress in marital conflict. They are in order: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. The book brought out the difference between complaining and criticism. Complaining can be healthy for a marriage because the grievance is shared and brought to light instead of staying hidden and festering. When it is received the person can change, and make the marriage healthier. Criticism is more personal, because it attacks the person’s character instead of the behavior. I think it is so important to make this distinction, because it is easy to slide from complaining to criticism. I Statements are used in complaining, and You statements are used in criticism is another important distinction. Learning to be aware of how you are speaking to each other is learning to handle conflict in a better way. After criticism moving into a more destructive pace is contempt. Gottman feels contempt has a malevolent aspect of mistreating your spouse with the intent of psychological abuse. Because we know where our partners' vulnerabilities are, it is easy to attack their weak spots. The relationship has become bitter at this point. Defensiveness is a response to contempt, because the victim wants to protect themselves and has a knee-jerk reaction to the attacks. Stonewalling is the fourth horseman, and it is a result of one partner giving up hope of things changing, and going silent on the other partner. It is a powerful silent statement, because it is exercising control. If the couple learns these destructive ways of

interacting, they can be on guard to letting them operate in their marriage conflicts. The other topic points to discuss are:

- o Don't run from strife-gunny-sacking the problems
- o Choose your battles carefully; you can't fight about everything
- o Define the issue clearly-what are we really fighting about
- o State your feelings using the XYZ formula. In situation X, when you do Y, I feel Z
- o Give up the put-downs over sexual performance, partners, parents, body image, comparison to other people, past loves.

My last session would be on sexual and spiritual intimacy. I would begin by going over the homework of exercise twenty-two of writing out their spiritual journey, and take the quizzes to see how they compare in viewing spiritual issues. The workbook offers a suggestion of spiritual activities that a couple can take part in together to strengthen their bond in outreach together. Spiritual unity can be created through working together to help in some area in the community or church. Praying together or discussing what passages of scripture inspire or challenge is another way to connect spiritually.

On sexual intimacy I would like to talk about men having a need physically for sex and women have a need for emotional intimacy. Emotional intimacy may be love and security for a woman, and admiration and respect for a man. The love languages could be taught and if touch is your partner's love language there needs to be touch sometimes without sex. I would like to explore if they have a proper attitude about sex. It is about developing a love relationship and learning what pleases your partner, not just satisfying your own needs. I would talk about how the two become one. It is not just your body, but it belongs to your spouse as well. Intimacy

matures with age and gets better like wine. I would also explain that it's ok to talk during sex and tell your partner what feels good or doesn't feel good. If past sexual abuse has happened there may be things that trigger past bad memories. You can discuss expectations of the number of times per week for sex. Lastly, I would like to remind them to plan for sex with romantic, intimate weekend get-a-ways. Many couples implement a date night on their calendar. I would explain how my husband took time every Friday morning, out of his busy schedule running a company, to have a coffee with me at our neighborhood Starbucks. This spoke volumes to me of his love and commitment to me and our marriage.

We offer through the church a Newly-married couples' small group that meets once a month to continue and facilitate learning and growth through marriage. Although most couples take part and enjoy the small group, another alternative would be to offer the option to come back for a session or two if needed.