

Alliance University

Pre-Marital Strategy Paper

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Premarital Counseling: MFT 505

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Due: February 21, 2023

Creating a strategy for pre-marital counseling requires clarification of two factors. One, is the couple coming for pastoral counseling or therapeutic counseling? To simplify, I will assume this strategy is for a clinical setting; however, special considerations for a pastoral context are offered in appendix A. A second major factor (are the couple Christians seeking biblical counseling, or not) is addressed within the curriculum.

Number of sessions and length of each session

This curriculum discusses 17 topics, which could be covered in 17 hour-long sessions. The degree to which the couple completes the homework, grasps the information, or that issues arise may impact the number of sessions. Of priority are the needs of the couple and the strength of the future marriage. Scheduled weekly, the curriculum could be covered in 6 months, with room to spare. Some variables, like the time available prior to the wedding, may determine the order in which the sessions are conducted, with some sessions continuing after the wedding. While our normal rate is \$200/hour, the pre-marital counseling rate is reduced to \$80/hour, plus \$70 for the Prepare/Enrich curriculum.¹ This curriculum is designed to be an investment in the couple's future, not an added expense or logistic for their wedding. Only those who complete this curriculum will understand the value of this investment. It is recommended as a valuable gift to the couple from their parents and/or friends.

Content Focus

Session #1, Introduction - This first session introduces the people involved (the couple and therapist), the curriculum, the process and the terms of the pre-marital therapy. Prior to this session, upon intake and scheduling, each partner is asked to begin creating a family tree (as much as possible), with the eventual goal of going at least three-generations back on both of their parent's families. This family tree is homework for the first appointment and will be developed

¹ Cost estimated for this assignment, indicating the intent of the service, as will be demonstrated.

in subsequent sessions. This first session aims to prepare and motivate the couple to understand and value the opportunity, be actively engaged in the process, and complete lite pre-session homework (which each session is contingent upon). No session will be held if homework is not completed, and if any session is not postponed within a 24-hour advance, the normal fee will be charged, and the session will be rescheduled. The couple will be informed of the therapist's client-based, blended therapeutic strategy, utilizing different methodologies and techniques, depending on the needs of the client. This therapist also embraces a Christian philosophic worldview (use of Scriptures and prayers are available, if requested). Finally, this training assumes that strong marriages are the product of two strong, mature individuals. Thus, the first five topics (following this introduction) will be individual sessions with each partner and the therapist. The bride and groom will each cover five topics 1-1 with the therapist in an estimated five sessions, at the half/rate of \$40 per session (for the therapist, this totals about ten sessions), focusing on each individual. This first session will end with discussion around the family trees, current observations and how they should further develop each family tree.

Strength as Individuals: In the **1st individual session** we will - make the family tree into a genogram, talk about their family of origin, discuss the strengths and challenges inherited, and create awareness of what each partner is bringing to the union. The goal is to cultivate intentionality and transparent collaboration regarding traits they are proud to bring into their marriage, and generational traits they want to overcome. There will likely be ongoing homework to continue fleshing out the genogram story (which may include contacting family members). Homework for the next session is to complete the online Prepare/Enrich (P/E) assessment.

In the **2nd individual session** we will focus on the results of the P/E assessment and the strengths and growth opportunities that each partner brings to the marriage. The couple will be

asked not to discuss this information with each other yet (the P/E assessment will be referred to throughout the curriculum); but, to allow each other space to process the results individually with the therapist, simultaneously learning the value of trust and patience. This includes discussing healthy habits for individuality, confidentiality vs. secrets, and respect (not reading each other's mail, etc.). The goal is to foster the couple as individuals while simultaneously being one. Homework for the next session is to itemize their personal savings, debt, salary and (to the degree they are able) current monthly expenditures.

The **3rd individual session** focusses on the financial picture, debt, credit card use, management of checking and savings accounts, past, present, and future income, desired lifestyle, including discussion of how finances were handled (and the impact of them) in the individual's family of origin. Doing this individually prepares both logistically and emotionally for a future joint session around finances. Homework for the next session is simply to be prepared (nothing written or formal, unless they choose to do so) to discuss their spiritual journey to date, and where they would like to see it in the future, as a couple and as a family.

The **4th individual session** discusses spiritual journey and values. Whether or not they are a Christian, or aligned with a formal religious system, they have a worldview. One's self-awareness is not complete without identifying what it is, and what they intend it to be. This session includes discussion of sexual history, what they have been taught, what they have experienced, what (of that history) their partner is aware of, and why this is important. The session will end with a discussion about "maturity," itemizing their benchmarks of good character. Homework is to continue listing elements of maturity and good character, coming prepared to discuss it next session (including evaluation of how they rate themselves in each

attribute (on a 1-4 scale, 4 being the highest). This session cultivates self-awareness in preparation for that identity to be intentionally and transparently merged with their partner.

The **5th individual session** continues the discussion on maturity and character from the previous session, follow-up and relatable discussion to the ongoing development of the genogram, and will conclude with a discussion of future goals for education, career, lifestyle, hobbies, where they want to live, etc. There is no homework before the next session.

The individual sessions may unveil need for more therapy. Couples may wish to start this curriculum post engagement and before choosing their wedding date. How further therapy is handled depends on each situation, with priority on the strength of the future marriage (not the schedule of the curriculum, or the wedding). In this the couple confronts their trust and commitment to each other's health and long-term happiness, which may create ambiguity, while confidently moving forward to their shared goal. If so, it will likely be the first of many similar tensions in their marriage. The remaining weeks will focus on strength as a couple.

Strength as a Couple: The remaining sessions are with the therapist and the couple. In this **7th session** (Introductory + 5 individual sessions = 6 prior sessions) we pursue **Familial Intimacy**, discussing the families joining together. Each partner will share what they learned through their genogram, what they are proud of, and what they are uncomfortable with. The therapist will encourage vulnerable questions and answers, and the couple will be challenged to discuss what they want their new, joined branch of the genogram to look like. Homework for week eight is to take the DISC personality assessment (<https://discpersonalitytesting.com>), forwarding the results to the therapist 24 hours before the 8th appointment.²

² If the couple has already taken DISC, Myers-Briggs, Enneagram, or another reputable personality assessment (and would prefer to use what they are already familiar with, they are welcome, and should forward the results to the therapist in preparation for the 8th session). I choose the DISC model for clarity and simplicity.

The **8th session** cultivates **Personality Intimacy**, comparing personality assessments (and P/E), and discussing their unique combination of traits, how they complement each other, where they can anticipate challenges, how they experienced each other's personalities so far (blessings and growth opportunities), and strategies for acknowledging and embracing differences. Homework is to consider gender roles, and the basis for those expectations.

The **9th session** pursues **Gender Intimacy**, discussing roles and expectations, starting with the genogram, discussing traditions in each partner's family of origin. Then, what standard will determine their family hierarchy? The goal is to embrace a shared hierarchy based on a shared standard, and shared understanding of what that standard points to, focusing on how the couple expects/intends to structure control/power/choice within their marriage. Homework is for each partner to write down three things they do to express love, three ways they can tell their partner loves them, and 3 ways their partner likes to be loved (no cheating!).

The **10th session** pursues **intimacy in communication**, discussing the five love languages (introducing them to Gary Chapman's book for future benefit). Then we will discuss communication, types of communication, their personal style, reflections of the P/E assessment, the power of words, the power of non-verbal, the need/opportunity for intentional building up and avoiding careless, minute tearing down. There is no homework for the next session.

The **11th session** pursues **spiritual intimacy**. The goal is to clarify perspectives and (to the degree possible) synergize intent, emphasizing the importance of this intimacy. This will include discussion on their concept of maturity and character. Homework involves continued discussion throughout the week to understand each other's journey discussing, why does life matter? What is your purpose? What do you want your children (if any) to believe, and how do you intend to teach them? How will your worldview be evidenced in your home?

The **12th session** pursues an understanding of **physical intimacy**, knowing one another's past, their belief and method (if any) of birth control, the role of sexuality, why sex is important, their intention and commitments for the future, resources for future reference and understanding, what they intend to teach and model for their children (if any). Homework for next session is to write down a brief definition of each partner's definition of love (no cheating!).

The **13th session** pursues **emotional intimacy**, understanding love in its many uses, comparing definitions, discussion on anger, conflict management, and forgiveness. How have they grieved? What have they experienced in their family of origin? In relation to love, anger and forgiveness, what is their intention for their new family unit? The only homework is to continue this discussion during the week (questions provided for dinner and text chats).

The **14th session** pursues **aspirational intimacy**. Goals. Each partner writes down what they think are the other's top three goals, and what their own top three goals are, then compare and discuss. This includes discussion of feasible change, flexibility, self-awareness, growth, communication, controllable future elements, uncontrollable future elements, and how these relate in their commitment to each other.

The **15th session** pursues **leaving and cleaving**, understanding the impact of in-laws, including discussion of patterns in the genograms, and the relationship between each partner and their own parents, their partner's parents, strengths, areas of growth, and how they can/should support one another. This includes the value of honoring parents while establishing healthy boundaries, and what that looks like. Homework is to keep this discussion going, as needed.

The **16th session** pursues **financial intimacy**. Here we focus on collaborative realities beginning with open sharing of status, and what that looks like combined (total debt, total savings, number of accounts, number of cards and types of cards, and total estimates of monthly

expenses). Then discussing the intended strategy for the combined household. How many accounts, which accounts, how many cards, which cards, who does what in the partnership, the strategy for building equity, paying down debt, future income, and expected standard of living. How can each partner use finances to convey reliability, trustworthiness, and love for each other?

The 17th **session** pursues **family intimacy**, how many children do you want to have (if any)? What do you envision your priorities in parenting to be? What will your roles be? Discussion of the genogram, P/E report, and wedding will be throughout the sessions, including here. This final session will revisit any open considerations from previous sessions and a discussion on how this counseling impacts what they intend for their branch of the genogram in the eyes of future generations. The therapy will conclude with the presentation of a letter (see Appendix B) congratulating the couple on embracing this investment in their future marriage.

Note: Some pre-marital counseling programs have contraindications or termination policies upon which the counseling is contingent. To paraphrase a famous Jewish rabbi, this counseling is for the sick seeking to get better. It is an honor to be able to instill in willing minds healthy preparation for marriage. If people are willing to attend, do the homework and participate in preparation for their wedding, we are thrilled for the opportunity to point them in the right direction for a strong marriage. The degree to which they embrace these lessons, including premarital sexual purity, is the degree to which they benefit from them.

Appendix A: Consideration for Pastoral/Church Context

This premarital counseling strategy has been for professional counselors within a clinical setting; however, it is very likely that the opportunity and need for pre-marital counseling will be presented within the church setting. It should! What then?

First, since strong marriages are made up of two strong and mature individuals, the goal of every church should be to intentionally cultivate maturity within every age group in the church. How unfortunate it would be for the church to suddenly offer a crash-course in finances, sexuality, spiritual disciplines, male/female identity and roles, and other critical elements to people who have been in their congregations since their influential years as youth, and to not begin cultivating these strengths until adulthood and engagement. Thus, instilling the traits that lead to strong marriages should be an intentional strategic initiative at every age of development within the church. This is not to say churches should cultivate an idealized culture preferential toward marriage; rather, that churches should cultivate a culture aimed toward maturity within every age group and at the earliest developmental opportunities possible. Second, in a church setting the pastor will likely be asked to officiate the wedding and can therefore require/offer specific counseling as terms for their participation (whether the counseling is performed by the pastor or coordinated through others within the church, the later being a strength available in the Church context). Thus, instead of the couple coming to the pastor for counseling, they may be coming for marriage, and it is the pastor's role to convince them of the need for counseling, which may alter the presentation depending on how receptive the couple are to this need. Third, the officiating Pastor can/will be able to take greater liberties in establishing and enforcing criteria for both counseling and the wedding. And, fourth, the Pastor would certainly influence any elements of the counseling, wedding and marriage that has theological implications.

Appendix B: Therapist's note upon couple's completion of program

MM/DD/YYYY

Dear [Couple's names];

Congratulations upon completion of your premarital training! I applaud your commitment to your own future, and your personal investment of time and resources in this milestone. Your completion of this curriculum is not merely another action item or expense for your wedding. As I hope you've realized, and you continue to realize in the years to come, completing this curriculum is not the end of anything; rather, it marks a beginning of your lives together.

I have every confidence that if you continue to embrace the importance of investing in your marriage and the lessons you have learned, you will experience a successful marriage of longevity, fulfillment, and happiness, and one that honors our Lord. To that end you will find enclosed \$1,360. This is the investment you made in your marriage coming back to you (as all good investments do), your final lesson in this curriculum, and something only available to couples who have successfully completed the curriculum. I only ask two things in return: First, that you not tell anyone of this transaction for another twenty years (the impact of this lesson would be lost if couples knew up front that the cost of the counseling would be reimbursed upon completion). Second, that twenty years from now you let me know how you're doing, as I will have been praying for you and eager to know (If I'm not alive, just tell God).

If I may be so bold, I am quite proud of your efforts, and grateful for the privilege of being part of your new journey together. As a Marriage and Family Therapist, I cherish the opportunity to help couples build healthy marriages right from the start.

I can't wait to see the future results of your commitment!

Dave

"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." - 1 John 1:7