

Pre-Marital Counseling:  
My Own Pre-Marital Strategy Paper:

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Learning about counseling and becoming a counselor are two very different concepts. I am enjoying all that I am learning in our Marriage and Family Therapy program however, putting the knowledge into practice can be challenging as you are stepping in unknown territory. Everyone in this program desires to be the best therapist they can be and we all want to make sure our sessions are making progress. That is why I appreciate this assignment, as I feel that preparing in advance and having an outline of how your sessions will go can be helpful for someone like me who is starting out. I know that family therapy will look different and it cannot always be planned, as some theories give the authority to end therapy to the client. However, with pre-marital counseling, having a strategic outline of how many sessions you will offer, what will happen in each session, the goals of each session, and any policy for termination you would enforce will help me as a pre-marital facilitator be organized and successful in helping couples.

As a facilitator, I have decided that 12 1-hour sessions would be sufficient to discuss what was important in order to prepare young couples for their future married lives. Each session will have a topic that I would like to focus on and the goal of every session will be to help the couple express what they think about each topic and help them work through that topic together. An hour is more than sufficient as there may be a lot to cover depending on how much or how little a couple has thought about each topic session. I also do not want to overextend the hour, as it may have been too much information shared at once and it is important for the couple to process on their own. I also do not want to provide less than an hour to make sure the couple has had time to express their individual opinions and concerns. There will also be moments where I will need to assign homework to the couple so that they can think about the topic and try to

discuss that among themselves and bring any challenges they face doing that exercise to the next session. If the couple focuses too much on one topic and cannot seem to find middle ground between their differences even after the exercises provided, then they should re-evaluate whether their strong differentiating views are an indicator that they should not marry. If couples put little to no effort in the counseling sessions, don't do the assigned homework, always show up late or not at all, or we discover addictions, then these insurances could mean that the couple is not ready for pre-marital counseling and I could advise to terminate.

The first session with a new couple would be the introduction session. As I have learned in our premarital course and also in other courses in the MFT program, the first session is needed for the therapist to join with their clients. Asking the couple how they met and allowing them to tell their story would be a good way to start to get to know each other. As mentioned in our classes, the content is important but so is paying attention to what is not being said. It's important to pay attention to the body language between the couple. The first session will also be used to establish what premarital counseling is for exposure to what they will go through throughout the 12 sessions but to also bring awareness about their own responsibility to counseling. It will also be important to advise the couple that I am a Christian and whether faith is an important topic in their relationship they would like to discuss. It will also be important to discuss whether there is any topic they would not like to talk about. It is important to find out what are the couple's deal breakers in order to bring that into the light, to verify if they both are on the same page. Finding out what the couple wants to avoid talking about is the best starting point for the sessions. Depending on each couples expectations the other 11 sessions will

have to be modified and interchanged in order to adapt to each prospective future marriage. It's important to go over the facilitator's/therapist's guidelines. By addressing that there is a "no secrets policy" it will avoid half of the couple to want to speak in confidence thinking that the therapist or facilitator will not share it with their partner. This pushes the couple to being honest with each other and allows the therapist or facilitator to not seem like they are picking sides. Before ending the first session, I would assign the couple to take the Prepare-Enrich assessment individually in order to review it in our next sessions.

In the second session, I would like to focus on each individual's family background. As each of them describes their family history, I will be putting together a genogram. Families shape us into who we are and what we believe. Each family has invisible rules we follow and it will be interesting to hear from each what are the family values that are important to each of them. Genograms will also be useful to identify the unspoken rules each family has and if there are any behavioral patterns within the family. Additionally, asking questions like what does it mean to be married to the couple or what does it mean to be single are important to identify what are their belief system about marriage and how they were raised around the idea. After receiving their results from the Prepare-Enrich assessment, this would be a good time to look at their Family Map and see how each individual feels towards their family of origin. This would be a good moment to discuss what traditions or values each individual wants to leave behind and not bring into their marriage and vice versa.

In the required reading, "Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts" by Drs. Les & Leslie Parrott, the authors also discuss how important it is to acknowledge the "unspoken

rules” and the “unconscious roles” that we have assigned to our future partners. An exercise that I would also like to include in the session, as homework, is for the couple to create their own 10 personal commandments as described on page 24 in the book and talk about it themselves. I also desire to become certified in the SYMBIS assessment as I feel there are useful tips in the workbooks that I can use interchangeably with Prepare-Enrich in the sessions. I could offer both assessments and see whether the couple desires to do one or both however I will interchangeably use the workbook exercises as they become relevant in sessions. By writing down 10 unspoken rules you have, it avoids future arguments and brings awareness to how each couple sees their marriage. This will prompt conversation as they decide how to adapt to one another to build a marriage based upon their own rules and not merely on their the rules of their family of origin.

During the third session, I would like to focus on the couple’s individuality. I would like the couple to not only be aware of their relationship with their family but I also want them to be aware of themselves and each other. I would like each couple to take the enneagram test outside of the session (will be either assigned after the first session or possibly after the second). The enneagram is important to see how the person views the world, relationships and themselves. This assessment is valuable in assessing individual values and their own personal stressors. In addition to the enneagram, by utilizing the tools provided in this course, the couple’s results from the SCOPE Personality Profile for their Prepare-Enrich assessment and the SYMBIS Assessment (if they decide to do both), will give us a better idea on how their two personalities relate to one another. These assessments help the couple become aware of their similarities and

differences and also help each to have the ability to work as a team to better their relationship by using their strengths to their advantage.

The fourth session will be used to discuss their relationship dynamics, overall satisfaction, idealistic distortion and their couple typology. All of this information comes from their assessment from Prepare-Enrich. After reviewing their results, I would like the couple to complete the “Sharing Strength and Growth Areas” from their workbook. As discussed in the workbook, I want each individual to take turns sharing what are strengths and what are their growth areas. After each had a chance to share, I want to know whether their responses shocked one another and whether they agree with each other. Lastly, I would use the session to have the couple complete the wish list exercise, where they list 3 things they would like more or less of in their relationship. These exercises will prompt conversations and help the couple work on their current relationship for a successful marriage.

After focusing on the couple’s strengths, growths and their individual wishes for their relationship, I want the fifth and sixth sessions to focus more on the couple’s conflict resolution. Within the fifth session, I would bring up the couple’s personal stress profile listed within the Prepare-enrich assessment. Knowing each other’s stress triggers will be important when it comes to avoiding unnecessary conflict that could arise in the future. By completing the exercise in the workbook, I will assist the couple in establishing their similar stresses and their different ones. By communicating each other’s stress, this will open the door for awareness for the couple to be mindful of. By completing the exercise, they can balance their priorities to limit the amount of stress they experience individually and even help each other out with their own goals.

After becoming mindful of their personal stresses, the sixth session's topic would be reviewing the conflict resolution in the Prepare-enrich assessment. Helping the couple understand their part in the conflict will be important in addition to understanding where the couple agrees and disagrees. Following the assessment, we would work on the conflict resolution workbook and attempt to resolve one problem that came up during reviewing the assessment and find 10 steps to come up with a solution. After choosing one solution to try, we would talk about their progress in the seventh session.

The seventh and eighth session primary focus would be on communication techniques for the couple to try to resolve their conflicts. "Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts" by Drs. Les & Leslie Parrott states, "Communication is not what you say, but what your partner understands by what you say," (page 99). During these two sessions, I will assist couples to slow down and listen to each other rather than having quick replies. They will need to learn to acknowledge what the other is saying and validate what the other says. We would review the communication skills that will help them increase intimacy on page 9 in their Prepare-enrich workbooks for them to be mindful of. After the end of the seventh session, I would assign the daily dialogue and daily compliments exercise from the Prepare-enrich workbook. During the eighth session, we would discuss the homework and if they saw any improvement in their conversations. We would use our time to use "I" statements instead of "you" statements to discuss any feedback the couple decides to give to one another. We would also discuss the necessity to avoid saying the words always and never.

Through our readings and our lectures, we discovered that couples fight mostly about 3 things, finances, sex and their in-laws. The ninth session would be a clear focus

on finances. As a couple approaching the altar, it will be necessary for the couple to determine what they want their finances to look like as a married couple to avoid future expectations that are not met by their partner. Another required reading in this course, “A Lasting Promise: The Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage”, states “Even when you are not fully aware of them, unmet expectations can lead to great disappointment and frustration.” (Page 158). We would use the financial management exercise in the Prepare-enrich workbook as a method to see how the couple value money similarly and differently. We would do the other workbook exercise of financial priorities as well.

The tenth session would focus on sex and intimacy and how important that will be in their relationship. What expectations does the couple have in marriage for more intimacy. We would discuss the different love types as described in the “Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts” book and where their current love type is. We would discuss how to get their love to become more balanced as in consummate love and how love normally changes and evolves over time. We would use the workbook in Prepare-enrich to have a discussion to define what affection means to each of them and how sex was treated in their respective families. If they are Christian, we would also focus on sex within the biblical perspective and how they view it within that aspect.

The eleventh session would be focused on roles within the household and their expectations of outside relationships such as family and friends. We would complete the relationship roles exercise within Prepare-enrich and determine what surprises they found on each other’s list. We would also discuss about what roles their family members also held in their own respective families and how that affects the roles they determine each spouse to have. Additionally, we would spend time discussing what role their individual

families and friends would have in their own relationship as a married couple. What are the expectations of friends and family do each individual have when it comes to having people over, spending time with other people besides their spouse, etc.

In terms of hierarchy or equalitarian structures, I would discuss the importance of the male “head” as described in the bible and how that is important in marriage. I would discuss the uniqueness of men and women and how important that is in the household. Whether or not the couple decides whether the woman works, the woman will still need to value her husband’s opinions and treat him with respect, even if she makes more than him financially. This may be a difficult conversation; especially for non-Christians but the couple needs to decide what roles work best for them while also still respecting each other’s opinions and leadership capabilities.

Our last session would depend on the couple’s personal beliefs. I would like the last session to talk about their spiritual journey as a couple and what they desire to do together to grow in their relationship with God and ultimately as a result, with themselves. We would use the spiritual journey questions in the Prepare-enrich workbook to open the couple up for discussion on their spiritual history and aspirations for their future family. If the couple does not have any spiritual beliefs, we would focus on the couple’s aspirations individually and as a family. What is the purpose of this marriage and how do their dreams support one another.

I will not limit counseling to Christian couples as described previously, as I believe premarital counseling is useful for all couples who want a lasting marriage. I do believe that God is who helps keep marriages together but who am I to impose my views on someone who has decided to live differently. It will be difficult to deal with couples

who live together prior to marriage as that is against what I believe, however I believe that counseling is the first step to acknowledging that you need something bigger than yourself to help make a marriage work. However, with either non-Christian couples or couples living together, I will discuss the importance of sexual purity during premarital counseling. If they agree within the first session, they will sign a contract and if they do not agree, than I am sure someone else will be a better fit. I unfortunately will not feel comfortable counseling couples from the LGBTQ+ community, as I do not feel equipped to help people in these situations. If I ever do encounter a couple wanting my services, I will graciously tell them my views and about my faith and how I do not see us being a right fit. Although I will not be able to work with all people, I think it will be an incredible experience to help others build a successful marriage before they even say I do.

## References

Parrott, L., & Parrott, L. (2015). *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts: Seven Questions to Ask Before -- and After -- You Marry*. Zondervan.

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