

Pre-Marital Counseling Strategy

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MFT 509

February 21, 2023

Pre-Marital Counseling Services Overview

Process and Expectations of Counselor and Client

Pre-marital counseling is designed to serve couples as early in their engagement as possible. Four decades of research reveals happy marriages are comprised of couples with healthy expectations of marriage, a realistic concept of love, positive attitude and outlook toward life, ability to communicate feelings, an understanding and acceptance of gender differences, the ability to make decisions and settle arguments, a common spiritual foundation and goal, deep and abiding commitment and covenant together (Parrott & Parrot, 2015)

Setting the foundation to establish well-being and healthy relationship patterns using research, science, data and insights is designed to develop key competencies in each person and couple through the process of premarital counseling. The couple can expect to refine expectations of themselves, each other and their marriage. They will learn and expand their thinking, feeling, reacting, behaving and relating. We believe in knowing thyself first, and then your beloved, best serves one another and the marriage. We focus on developing skills, habits and ways that generate emotional intimacy, communication and understanding, self-control, empathy, compassion and kindness. Our intention to welcome couples to a comfortable environment where we teach couples to enjoy the journey as they soak in information, practice new ways of relating and being with one another and envision their married life together. We hope to provide a wellspring of life-giving tips, thoughts, ideas and practices the couple will build into muscle memory and carry with them throughout their marriage forever, and in turn, share their way of being with others.

Couples can expect to work with professionals who specialize in the field of marriage and family counseling and have received clinical training and certifications from accredited organizations. Couples will work with a certified PREPARE/ENRICH Facilitator and Start Your Marriage Before It Starts (SYMBIS) Marriage Mentor. They will be expected to complete assessments, work in between sessions for deeper self-reflection,

exploration and discovery and apply in sessions what they are learning in themselves, in one another and for their marriage.

The couple can expect a counselor to debrief all assessment results, select appropriate, evidence-based practices and exercises designed to improve their specific goals and development. The couple can expect counseling that addresses and includes the whole person: mind, soul, heart, body and their whole relationship. The goal is to develop a bond of strength in the couple as a team, understanding of thyself and thy beloved. Research shows that with greater peace and connection, the most important factors for men and women, respectively, reduce divorce. (Stanley et al, 2014) We are committed to sharing life-giving preparation for the couple's relationship and their individual and interdependent growth.

The counselor expects clients to be motivated to learn, grow, develop and create clear and realistic goals for marriage. Clients are expected to complete honestly all assessments, participate in conversations and skills practices in sessions, and complete assignments in-between sessions, whether it be to read, journal or practice new skills. The curriculum serves couples with multicultural worldviews, contexts and beliefs including different religious affiliations, spiritual development and beliefs, or none. During the In-Take process, the couple is asked to complete a questionnaire. Christian couples will receive specific content and materials with references to the Holy Bible, prayer is offered in sessions and a focus of deepening spiritual development and intimacy throughout the counseling process is extended.

Integrity of the Process. Integrity is defined as the firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values; an unimpaired sound condition or the quality of being complete or undivided. (Merriam Webster, 2023) For counseling to be beneficial, the couple and counselor must be committed to transparency and integrity undergirded by trust and the ethical and professional care provided by the counselor. The counselor uses only the evidence-based practices and valid and reliable assessments. The couple is regularly asked throughout the process for feedback to assure their expectations are being met in the counseling process and questions related to the content are clearly answered, as well as the performance of the counselor. Everyone is encouraged to speak openly, ask questions, provide comments and share concerns.

Informed Consent. Prior to the first session, the couple will be given guidelines about communications and the importance of open, two way and collaborative communications to prevent triangulation. The digital links to the ethical code of the American Association of Marital and Family (AAMFT) and federal, state and local regulatory agencies responsible for enforcement of confidentiality and privacy, and the limits of privacy and confidentiality. These documents will be reviewed, discussed and signed prior to the start of the first session. During the In-Take process, each of the couple will be independently asked to confirm no incidence of addiction and/or abuse, violence, trauma or loss they are experiencing. In the event they are experiencing these serious mental health difficulties, suggested referrals will be provided so they may address their needs with qualified and licensed providers. The legal, regulatory and professional ethical requirements of reporting, and limitations of privacy and confidentiality, will be contained in the informed consent client forms.

Terms and Conditions of Counseling Agreement. Prior to the first session, clients will receive a digital counseling agreement which outlines: clients' responsibilities, counselor's responsibilities, in-take forms and questionnaires, informed consent, an overview of the process and phases, professional liability limitations and non-guarantee clauses, the rights of the clients and the counselor and the aim to provide an enriching, comfortable, nonjudgmental place of honesty and trust for the transfer of knowledge, skills and tools to prepare the couple for an enlightening premarital time for their mutual growth and fulfillment. Materials and assessments may require additional a la carte pricing. Discount pricing is available for groups, churches, spiritual centers, retreat venues, community centers, college and university campuses and all Christian and Missionary Alliance organizations.

Logistics, Number of Sessions, Duration and Rationale. A minimum of 15 sessions are required and held *ideally a minimum of 12 months prior to the wedding date*. The rate is \$150 per couple per 45-minute session. Cancellations by text, call or email are required 48 hours prior to the start of the appointment. Periodically, a double 90 minute session, upon previous agreement, is more effective for the client's histories, assessment debriefs, and family genogram.

Content, Goals, Resources, Supplemental Work. Premarital Counseling will use the PREPARE/ENRICH and SYMBIS materials and associated assessments. PREPARE/ENRICH offers specialized content for Devitalized and Conflicted Couples, Christians, Stepfamilies and Groups. The following content assumes *PREPARE/ENRICH For Couples* and supplemental materials for a Christian couple. To bond, and establish the counselor-couple relationship, we begin with the client and share some insights about love and marriage. As the content progresses, we move to the data and debrief revealed in the assessment. Because patterns of behavior and emotional processing and attachment and trust are formed by the family of origin, this step is added at the front of the process because it may reveal emotional intelligence, patterns of thinking, communicating and working through conflict to better prepare the couple's deeper understanding of one another beyond the data of the assessment. Because conflict, communication, and intimacy are often more difficult topics to discuss and change, those are later in the process, after the couple may become more comfortable in the experience and in trusting the counselor as well. The session content, assignments, and goals are outlined as follows:

- Session 1 “How we met....” Love Stories, Stages and Myths
SYMBIS Love’s Stages
SYMBIS Marriage Myths
SYMBIS Myths for Reflection Questions and Assignment
Review/Discuss Agreement, Informed Consent, Questions, Comments
PREPARE/ENRICH Assessment Assignment

- Session 2 Review SYMBIS Myths for Reflection Assignment
Managing Marriage Expectations
Personality – SCOPE Out Your Personality
PREPARE/ENRICH Debrief: Areas of Strength, Growth and Relationship Dynamics
Review Assessment Results and Prepare Areas of Curiosity Assignment

- Session 3 Review PREPARE/ENRICH Assessment Areas of Curiosity Assignment
Couple and Family Maps
Genogram Introduction
Couple and Family Maps Assignment

- Session 4 Review Couple and Family Maps Assignment
Relationship Roles and Person Stress Profile
Identifying Most Critical Issues
Balancing Your Priorities
Wedding Stress
Personal Stress Profile Exercises Discussion and Assignment

- Session 5 Review Personal Stress Profile Assignment
Genogram Spiritual and Religious, Loss and Trauma
Spiritual Beliefs and Journey
Your Spiritual Journey Discussion and Assignment
Lasting Promise: The Power of Commitment Read/Journal Assignment
- Session 6 Review Your Spiritual Journey and Power of Commitment Assignments
Conflict Resolution – Ten Steps and How to Take a Time-Out
Seeking and Granting Forgiveness Assignment
Lasting Promise: Forgiveness and Restoration Read/Journal Assignments
- Session 7 Review Seeking and Granting Forgiveness and Forgiveness and Restoration
SYMBIS/Gottman Four Horsemen Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, Stonewall
SYMBIS How to Fight a Good Fight for Reflection Assignment
- Session 8 Review SYMBIS How to Fight a Good Fight Assignment
Communication Assertiveness and Active Listening Wishlist
Daily Dialogue and Daily Compliments
SYMBIS Bedrock of Successful Communication and Rules
SYMBIS Rules for Successful Communication for Reflection Assignment
- Session 9 Review Rules for Successful Communication Assignment
SYMBIS Bridge the Gender Gap: She to be cherished/respected/known. He to be admired/have
autonomy/enjoy shared activities
Emotional Intimacy Handout Discussion and Assignment
Leisure Activities: The Dating Exercise Assignment
- Session 10 Review: The Dating Exercise Assignment
Review Emotional Intimacy Handout Assignment
Children and Parenting – Discussion
Vision Board for your marriage and life Assignment
- Session 11 Review Vision Board for your marriage and life Assignment
Family Finances
Challenges, Meaning, Priorities, Importance of Financial Goals
Discuss similarities and differences in Financial Management
Budget Worksheet Homework
- Session 12 Review Budget Worksheet Assignment
Stress Inventory Handout
SYMBIS Making Love Last a Lifetime
Lasting Promise: Touch and Sexual Oneness Read/Journal Assignment
Write a love letter to your beloved to exchange at our next session
- Session 13 Review Lasting Promise: Touch and Sexual Oneness Homework
Your Wedding Ceremony, Your Vows
Sex and Affection
Expression of Intimacy
Exchange love letters

Session 14 Open session topic chosen by couple

Session 15 Evaluation of counseling experience, feedback, additional sessions year one, closing session

Contraindications and Termination Policy

This practice is not qualified nor licensed to provide mental health counseling services including but not limited to abuse, domestic aggression and/or violence, addiction, depression, suicidal ideation, eating disorders and all serious mental health disorders. Clients requiring this level of care will receive a suggested referral and notification of termination of premarital counseling services via the communication means the client provided on their In-Take form. We provide ethical care limited to our qualifications for services.

Conditions to Receive Pre-Marital Counseling

We are honored to walk alongside each couple's significant life decision to marry and to help the couple create a strong foundation for their marriage. We believe in mutual respect and honesty, character and virtue. We demand this of ourselves and expect the same from our clients. We all strive to grow deeper in self-control, compassion, truth, gentleness and courage. To receive services, we expect clients to be punctual, complete assignments, and be committed to the process of premarital counseling. Because of belief in The Holy Trinity and God's inerrant Truth as written in the Holy Bible, we provide premarital counseling to heterosexual couples created in God's image, from conception, as a woman and a man. We respectfully provide referrals. Our belief is longer engagements and premarital counseling for at least one year create better outcomes. For remarriages, research indicates two years pass following the finalization of divorce before dating commences, and the timeframe lengthens based on the tenderness for children's development and their ages, the number of children, and the number of biological parents and stepparents in the joining of families through remarriage. (Deal, 2014) We invite couples to consider sexual abstinence and a Sexual Purity Covenant, even when sexual relations and cohabitation have occurred because we believe the Covenant strengthens the sacredness of marriage and provides deeper growth in unconditional and sacrificial love as well as emotional and spiritual intimacy. Clients are required to be single, and in the committed, monogamous

engagement to receive premarital counseling. In the event of infidelity, the couple is invited to continue premarital counseling focused on repentance, forgiveness, trust and reconciliation to move forward, and we respect the couple's decision.

Termination of Services During Pre-Marital Counseling

Cancellation of the Agreement for Services is permissible by either, or both, clients. To assure continuity of care and ethical and professional treatment, prior to termination, a brief consultation with the counselor is required. The counselor needs to seek feedback, clarity and understanding to assure **no egalitarian or power hierarchy** is in play which could occur in the form of bias from the counselor which requires self-evaluation, bracketing, consultation with a supervisor or peer and a referral if the counselor is unable to perform ethical and professional care. If present within the couple, it may indicate violence and/or abuse. If this is the case, the counselor should seek consultation with a mental health counselor for guidance to provide ethical and professional care related to an area beyond the counselor's skill and experience and credentials. It will be necessary to speak independently with the client to assure an opportunity to speak freely and to offer as much care, safety and security as possible and if confirmed, be able to provide suggested referrals. The informed consent may be needed to be reviewed and appropriate care and referrals made with consultation immediately with a mental health counselor and agencies.

If during counseling, a client commits fraud, misrepresentation or false pretenses, the client is contacted and given an opportunity to clarify, prior to termination, to assure professional and ethical care. In the event contraindications are discovered during premarital counseling, as mentioned above, efforts are made to suggest referrals and the client is notified of termination of services. Failure to provide payment upon completion of a session results the counselor contacting the client to assure continuity of professional and ethical care, and referral or termination of services may result.

Conclusion

With resources, assessments, materials and trained marriage professionals guided by evidence-based practice and life-giving Truth, we believe couples benefit from the premarital skills, knowledge, awareness and abilities required for satisfying, lasting and loving marriages. With new learning and counselors specifically trained to support and challenge the couples to grow and develop, we are honored to join them on a small part on their journey. Today's assessment market, books, podcasts and journals are rapidly gaining interest as people struggle with well-being, resiliency and self-control. We are guided by Biblical Truth and a desire to fulfill the Great Commission through the offer of premarital counseling. We seek the Holy Spirit to indwell in couples and counselors as we teach and learn and to create deeper emotional intelligence, commitment, forgiveness, communication, conflict management and intimacy with couples, marriages, and families. We look to share Christ's hope, love, peace and joy with couples who pass it on.

References

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