

**Pre-Marital Strategy Paper**

Vinni Sabnani

MFT 509: Premarital Counseling- Alliance University

Prof. Michelle S. Park, M.A., LMFT

February 21, 2023

o Content focus for each session with any supplemental homework. Clearly state the reason for each “content” selection and related goal(s) for each session.

**Number of Sessions:** 7 sessions. All sessions are 45min to 1-hour

**Follow-up sessions:** 3 months: (3-5 sessions based on the couple’s needs); revisit in 1 year ( an hour group session and 1-hour individual session), again in 2 years as a check-up.

Married couples will be given resources for marriage seminars and retreats as a way to strengthen their relationship. In case the couple is not married in 2 years- 7 more sessions are suggested to have clarity if the couple should consider breaking the relationship. The 2-year session will be considered the final stage of termination with the couple seeking premarital counseling. The weekly instead of bi-weekly sessions are intended as protection for couples from getting too emotionally invested for longer if they have to part ways. 45 minutes is a good enough time for both the therapist and the couple to focus. Extra 15 minutes is for pleasantries as well as prayer and wrapping up. The choice of counseling with a Christian perspective is given to the couple. If chosen then the counselor will incorporate bible passages in the session and pray with the couple at the end of every session.

Many couples take the pledge to ‘Love and Cherish’ each other as part of their wedding vows. The intention of pre-marital counseling is to help the couple get a deeper understanding of the marriage commitment and work towards spiritual and relational practices which will enable couples to love and cherish marriage. The goal of the pre-marital session is to help the couple “[Create] a marriage that feels more precious, more connected and more satisfying” (Thomas, 2017, p. 22).

***Session 1: Introduction, intake, and Prepare- Enrich evaluation explained***

The purpose of the session is for the therapist and the couple to feel comfortable with each other and have clarity on the number of sessions, goals, and objectives, explain

housekeeping rules, and termination policies. It also helps the therapist evaluate the relationship status through the couple's body language, discussion of how they met, and the support they have from family and friends. If any previous marriages, relationships, or children are involved the counselor will discuss more details. Any particular areas the couple is seeking to work on?

*Homework:* To do the Prepare-Enrich evaluation separately before they come to the next session.

### ***Session 2: Family of Origin work and couple's expectations from marriage***

Blessings, rules, roles, and dysfunctions are passed on as legacies and unless we understand the same we will carry on the same into our marriages and future generations. The goal of the session is to assess the couple's current relationship style. If the relationship is an A-frame (dependent), H-frame (independent), or M-frame (interdependent). Handout of 36 questions of family legacies: Rules. The therapist will give an understanding of family roles and discuss with the couple the roles they played in their families and the changes they desire. The prepare-enrich topics of mapping, relationship dynamics, and goals, family roles conversation will give a further gauge of the couple's dynamics.

*Homework:* A one-page fun questionnaire called How well do you know me? This questionnaire will have simple questions like favorite color, favorite food, best vacation ever, etc. which each partner fills for themselves and what they think their partner might write. Once done they have to discuss each other's answers.

### **Session 3: Evaluation of the prepare-enrich assignment**

Couples committing to marriage are not just getting into a relationship with the person they currently are, but also have to deal with the people they were, and the people they will become through marriage. Prepare-enrich testing helps give an insight into key areas that help

them understand their position on various topics. Discuss the experience that the couple had with the homework ‘How well do you know me’ and if there was anything new that they learned about each other. This session will be fully devoted to the prepare enrich couples' assessments. The prepare-enrich workbook exercises of sharing strength and growth areas will be a starting conversation where the couple will be asked to select 3 areas and tell each other why they think it is a strength or growth area in their relationship. (*Workbook for couples 2021*). Depending on the assessment results and the couple’s selections strengths will be highlighted to strengthen the couple and growth areas will be discussed in detail.

*Homework:* The therapist will choose some topics from the prepare-enrich workbook that they had good scores on for the couples to do as a fun activity together. (*Workbook for couples 2021*) For the next 2 weeks, couples will be asked to take turns in choosing one activity of their interest that their partner needs to join them on. Also, one growth area will be chosen to ask couples to reflect upon and journal or record their thoughts individually in the next 2 weeks.

#### ***Session 4: Sex as a union that glorifies God***

We start this session with a follow-up on the fun activity. Couples will be asked to fill out the ‘Knowing Me, Knowing You’ handout (Dr. Mercurio, Alliance graduate school Nyack). Handout of how to speak your spouse’s love language (Graphic table by fierce marriage.com). Based on the prepare-enrich results and the handout activity couples' understanding and expectations of sex, and their love languages will be discussed. If seeking Christian counseling stronger emphasis would be put on purity before marriage. The perspective of emotional/spiritual intimacy brings sexual intimacy. God’s design of the idea of two shall become one through sexual intimacy to form a new entity surrounded by God’s protection, is the mystery and foundation which Christian couples enter into through marriage. The therapist will also guide

conversations about the couple's fears of sex, views on having children, the effect of porn on sexual intimacy, and understanding of passionate sex to companionship at various stages of life.

*Homework:* Suggested reading: Sacred Marriage. Having discovered each other's love language do something specific which speaks to your partner's love language. Watch the movie: The dating project

### ***Session 5: Keys to good communication and conflict resolution***

Even if the couple has scored well in this aspect, this topic will be discussed as I believe it will be instrumental to couples for happier marriages. If anger seems to be an issue that the couple face there will be time dedicated to discussing ways of managing anger. Watch the U-Tube short on "Don't talk about the nail" The concept of The Four Horsemen: Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt, and Stonewalling will be discussed. Couples will be encouraged to role-play with examples of the four styles that will be incorporated. Handouts will be provided for the feelings chart along with an explanation of the "I statement" to express how one feels while being specific. Reactions v/s responses in conflicts will be discussed. Strategies of talking without fighting by understanding filters that distort communication and using TIP statements (T-trigger, I-Impact, P-preference) will be discussed.

*Homework:* Try some of the strategies discussed during the session and report back the changes in communication between the couple. Were there any conflicts that arose and were settled more amicably?

### ***Session 6: Building teamwork***

This session is focused on areas the couple might have scored low on the assessment. To get the couple comfortable we will discuss the experience of doing an activity of the partner's choice. One or two areas that the couple had a lower score on will be discussed in detail. Couples will be

asked to share from their journaling their thoughts about their growth areas. Depending on their growth area they will be asked to intentionally work on the same and strategies will be discussed so they can go be effective in making the change. Areas of finance would be discussed. If couples have not discussed this in the past they would be asked to do so.

*Homework:* Intentionally pondering on growth areas and making changes. Christian couples will be encouraged to pray for each other and themselves as they surrender their growth areas to God and ask the Holy Spirit to intervene to help them change. Discipline of fasting can be considered.

### ***Session 7: Blueprints of a God-honoring marriage***

A marriage can only be as strong as the least healthy person in the relationship. Since this is the last session time will be used to summarize all that we discussed and address any questions the couple might have. At the beginning of the session, couples will be given the 10 questions for Assessing dedication commitment questions (Stanley et al., 2014, p. 261). Depending on their level of dedication choices we may be able to move on to the final stage of the session which will be about the triangle of passion, intimacy, and commitment triangle. If any of the couples are still not ready for the commitment further counseling on areas they are struggling with will be suggested before they decide to go ahead with planning the next step of marriage. If the couples seem ready to choose to commit then we can close our time together in prayer.

The couple will be asked to make a follow-up 3-month session. This will give the couple some time to implement the strategies and be able to provide accurate feedback to know the health of their relationship. Depending on their relationship they will be suggested to meet up for 2 or 5 more sessions.

o Couple configurations or couple issues that would negate your ability to provide this service?

The below situations would negate my ability to provide services:

- 1) The configuration of couples living in polygamous relationships, or belonging to a cult will not benefit from pre-marital counseling for couples as they have other hierarchies that would affect the relationship and hinder the session.
- 2) Couples who are currently in active divorce settlements and not divorced yet
- 3) Close family and extended family will be referred to other therapists so as not to blur the line between professionalism and personal relationships.
- 4) Couples who intend to have a sadomasochistic marriage relationship will not benefit as the therapist is not equipped to handle the case as it can be seen as abuse and need to be reported.

o Contradictions or termination policy for premarital counseling.

All client-therapist policies will be in accordance with the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy Ethics Code. "The AAMFT Code of Ethics is binding on members of AAMFT in all membership categories, all AAMFT Approved Supervisors and all applicants for membership or the Approved Supervisor designation." (Advanced Solutions International)

In addition, sessions can be terminated midway without dispute in case of below situations:

- a) Addiction or abuse suspected during the counseling sessions, the current pre-marital session will be terminated and the clients will be referred to therapists who they need to work on individually to address the problem before entering into pre-marital counseling.
- b) If either of the partners is currently married and not divorced or living with another partner.

- c) If the couple fails to do their required off-session work more than 2 times, it can be a reason for termination as it is detrimental to the progress of the couple.
- d) Any abuse, human trafficking, or mental health issues that are discovered during the sessions, the therapist is mandated to report to authorities and terminate.
- e) If there is a conflict of interest or unforeseen circumstances for the therapist or client the therapy sessions can be terminated with a 24-hour notice without any dues.
- f) Cancellations are allowed only twice and be made 24 hours prior to the appointment
- g) Fees for the previous sessions are not cleared.

[Briefly state any policy regarding sexual purity during premarital counseling.](#)

Irrespective of the couple's beliefs, the therapist strongly suggests the concept of practicing sexual purity and staying in two separate homes especially during the premarital counseling stage as it can help the couple have an unbiased and realistic expectation. For a successful marriage, there has to be a strong component of companionship, respect, and love. Respecting each other's bodies and boundaries will help them exhibit their sincere love for one another and get a chance to build on their companionship, intimacy, and stability. This becomes even more crucial for married couples raising children. For couples who fail to practice sexual purity, they find the high level of romance and emotional closeness felt in the early stages of the relationship dwindling after marriage and they are unable to connect, as companionship and commitment as a couple was never established. If the concept is too difficult for the couple to engage in they can terminate the rest of the suggested therapy sessions. The reason termination is suggested as not being able to restrain from sexual intimacy before marriage is seen as a red flag to an unhealthy reason for committing to a God-honoring long-term marriage.

## References

- How to speak your spouse's love language (and what to avoid)*. Fierce Marriage. (2020, February 7). Retrieved February 21, 2023, from <https://fiercemarriage.com/how-to-speak-your-spouses-love-language-what-to-avoid>
- Dr. Mercurio Andrew. Healthy communication Alliance Graduate School of Counseling, Nyack.  
*Knowing Me, Knowing You*
- Parrott, L., & Parrott, L. (2015). *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts: Seven Questions to Ask Before and After -- You Marry*. Zondervan.
- Stanley, S. M., Trathen, D., McCain, S., & Bryan, M. B. (2014). *A Lasting Promise: The Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage* (New and Revised). Jossey-Bass.
- Thomas, G. L. (2017). *Cherish: The One Word That Changes Everything for Your Marriage* (International Edition). Zondervan.
- Advanced Solutions International, I. (n.d.). *Code of Ethics*. Code of ethics. Retrieved February 21, 2023, from [https://www.aamft.org/Legal\\_Ethics/Code\\_of\\_Ethics.aspx](https://www.aamft.org/Legal_Ethics/Code_of_Ethics.aspx)
- Workbook for couples*. Prepare/Enrich. (2021, September 22). Retrieved February 21, 2023, from <https://www.prepare-enrich.com/workbook-for-couples/>
- Written by: Ana De la Cruz LMFT, & MD, R. by: K. F. (n.d.). *What are John Gottman's Four horsemen?* Choosing Therapy. Retrieved February 21, 2023, from <https://www.choosingtherapy.com/four-horsemen/>