

Premarital Strategy Paper

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Pre-marital Sessions Overview

I have had the pleasure of going through the Prepare/Enrich pre-marital counseling sessions with a couple that will be married next month. Due to the limited availability of time between my certification as a Prepare/Enrich facilitator and the marriage, we had agreed to have a total of four sessions. Although each session lasted about 75 minutes, there were a few topics that we were unable to fully flesh out.

Therefore, after much consideration and reflection, I would want future pre-marital counseling sessions to have a total of eight sessions, each running for about 60 minutes. Having an hour-long session would give the couples a chance to process the various topics that are discussed each week. The sessions will begin at least 3 months prior to the wedding because the stress and anxiety of the final month wedding preparations could take the focus away from the sessions.

After the final pre-marital session, I would conclude with the following events: (1) a dinner with my family and (2) a present to help facilitate dates between the couple. Although it would be wonderful to have my wife present in the pre-marital sessions, it is difficult due to language and time. Therefore, having dinner at the end might be a way for the couple to see and experience what family life can look like with kids. As for the present, my wife and I had a season when the sole focus was to raise our children and meet their needs. Our time as a couple was overlooked and it brought undue hardship to our family. One of the lessons that I personally want to emphasize is to keep dating your spouse. The couple would be given the option for a follow-up session around their 1-year wedding anniversary. I am assuming that I am operating out of the context of my current church ministry and so a fee will not be charged other than the price of the Prepare/Enrich assessment.

Contraindications

The most common contraindications that therapists look for are the 3 A's: addictions, affairs, and abuse. Although substance addictions are discussed frequently, addiction to pornography or other sexual addictions are often left undisclosed in couple therapy. Since sex is expected to be a significant part of a marriage, any sexual addictions must be addressed before or during the course of pre-marital counseling. I also believe that full closure is necessary for one's partner to prepare and be conscious of any potential recurring issues. Hiding one's relationship with an addiction is common, but for a couple to thrive, both partners must work together to tackle this problem from recurring in the future.

If either or both partners are engaged in an active affair, pre-marital counseling should be terminated. For premarital counseling to be effective, there must be a conscious decision to call off the affair; otherwise, the ongoing affair will deter or halt any progress made in the sessions. Choosing to be with a specific intimate partner is always a choice. However, if the cheating partner refused to disengage from the affair, the premarital sessions must cease.

Abuse in any form – emotional, physical, sexual – is a contraindication to pre-marital counseling. In the case of abuse, ensuring the safety of the abused will be the priority. When the victim is unable to share their experience honestly, a counselor may inadvertently end up collaborating with the abuser. In addition, any information obtained through the vulnerability of a session can be used against the victim. Another consideration is that an abusive relationship cannot be properly assessed for improvement because the abuser will not be able to see the relationship from the abused perspective and the abused would have been affected by the abuse. In addition, if a partner has undergone past abuse in any form, he or she should gain the help of

an individual therapist. The consequences of that abuse will manifest in various forms throughout the marriage and awareness of possible traumatic triggers will be important.

An additional contraindication for my premarital counseling sessions will be LGBTQ couples. I believe that marriage as defined by the Word of God is the union of a man and a woman to become one flesh. Because the relationship of LGBTQ couples are outside of the parameters established by Scripture, I would refer them to another counselor who would be willing to take them on as clients. The sexual purity of the engaged couple would also be a consideration because of the standard set up by Scripture.

Sexual Purity

The couple will be asked to take a covenantal vow to remain sexually pure until the wedding ceremony. Though the culture suggests co-habitation is necessary to “test out the marriage”, the Bible is clear that sex between a married couple is the only form of sex that is not considered sexual immorality. To best uphold the sexual purity policy, the couple will be asked not to cohabit during the duration of the engagement. Staying away from co-habitation would be the most practical way to remain sexually pure prior to the wedding ceremony.

Termination Policy

Because there are only eight sessions, there will be a stringent ‘3 strikes’ termination policy. A strike will include any of the following scenarios: (1) if the couple show up more than 10 minutes late to a session; (2) if the couple cancels the session without availability to make it up during the week; (3) if the couple cannot uphold the sexual purity policy; or (4) if the couple doesn’t complete the previous week’s assignment. The only exception to receiving a strike will be unplanned interruptions, such as a family emergency involving illness or death. If a

contraindication is revealed through the course of the sessions, then the pre-marital sessions will be terminated and may restart after the contraindications have been fully addressed.

Premarital Session Details

Session #1

The first session will be the Introduction session. Prior to the first session, the couple would be asked to complete the Prepare/Enrich Assessment. The goals of the first session will be threefold: (1) to hear the couple's story of how they got together; (2) understand why they want to get married; and (3) to explore the marital expectations of both partners. For this session, the following Prepare/Enrich worksheets will be used: Sharing Strength and Growth Areas and Marriage Expectations. The first homework will be to take the 5 Love Languages Assessment before the next session. An ongoing assignment that I would give the couple is to have dinner with different married couples within their church every 2 weeks; the interaction with a married couple is meant to have a positive influence and to provide mentorship and encouragement.

Session #2

The second session will focus on Individual Assessments, looking at the worksheets of the Personal Stress Profile and Scope Personality. The goal of this session is to further understand the couple from their individual backgrounds. Due to a difference of personalities and how they view/react to the world around them, couples must understand the differences of one another in order to facilitate clearer communication. The homework for this week is "FOO's Ten Commandments + 2" (Dr. Mercurio).

Session #3

The third session will highlight Family of Origin dynamics and the concept of transforming from 'I' to 'We'. The Mapping Your Relationship worksheet would be used. Dr.

Mercurio's 'Ten Commandments + 2' will be discussed as well. Additional questions to be asked would include: (1) What, from your FOO, do you want to bring into your marriage? and (2) What don't you want to bring into your marriage? Because our families of origin are the only models we have for family, we have internalized and learned our responses from our families. It will be important to recognize some of the positive and negative traits that will be brought into the new union. This session's homework will be to create a plan for family gatherings during the holidays, i.e. whose in-laws' house are going to be visited for which holidays, etc.

Session #4

The fourth session will discuss Communication and Conflict Resolution. The Prepare/Enrich worksheets to be used for this session are: Assertiveness/Active Listening, Creating a Wish List, and Ten Steps for Resolving Conflict,. Though both of these topics are extensive topics, my underlying belief is that conflict resolution begins with good communication. A great question for the couple to probe is: "What do you contribute to the conflict?" The session will also be a practice run to express assertiveness and active listening. Active listening skills are great skills to learn as a couple and especially as parents. This week's homework is to "practice 3 assertive statements to your partner and to practice active listening skills."

Session #5

The fifth session will cover the topics of Anger and Forgiveness. 'How to take a Time Out' and 'Seeking and Granting Forgiveness' worksheets will be used. I think a discussion of how each partner expresses their anger is prudent. Other topics to be considered: what are the topics/actions that anger you the most? How do you relieve your anger – as individuals and as couples? I think that most couples don't realize that the anger that they have exhibited during

their dating and engagement is the tip of the iceberg compared to the anger that one may show during their marriage. It will take a lot of wisdom and self-reflection to understand the cause of their anger. The follow-up is how they will respond after the anger – it is hopefully towards reconciliation and forgiveness. The homework for this week is to recognize the somatic symptoms the couple notice as they lean in towards their anger. As they recognize that their bodies are responding, the next step is to find ways to short-circuit the immediate angry outburst.

Session #6

The sixth session will delve into Spiritual and Sexual Intimacy. The following worksheets will be used: Dating Exercise, Expression of Intimacy, and Your Spiritual Journey. The marital relationship is the most intimate relationship that one may have, both in spirit and body (and soul). The goal of marriage is to reflect the grace and love of Christ to your partner, and to be transformed into the likeness of Christ daily. While getting ready for the wedding, many times spirituality is placed on the back burner. Sex will also be an area where most couples don't discuss. Opening up a space for discussion will be helpful for the couple to communicate their needs and wants better. This week's homework will be to begin reading Scripture together (Song of Solomon would be a great start) to deepen their spirituality.

Session #7

The penultimate session will cover Parenting and Addressing the Unexpected. The Discussion about Children from the Prepare/Enrich Couple's Workbook would be used for this session. The discussion has a very broad range of categories which couples may not have considered while preparing for children, including unexpected pregnancy and the inability to have children. Additional information about miscarriages and stillbirths should be introduced at this time. Many of these discussions will fall into the category of "Things We Didn't Know We

Had to Discuss”. To further those discussions, addressing the unexpected and the fears we may be bringing into the marriage would be important. Gary Thomas suggests that a discussion of how to deal with fear in a marriage is of utmost importance. Many of the topics brought up for discussion will not have an immediate answer and further discussion needs to take place. The homework is to fill a jar with unanswered discussion questions on pieces of paper and to tackle at least one discussion per week until a resolution is made.

Session #8

The final session will conclude with a discussion of Finances and Goals. As one of the most topics to cause marital tension, the conversation about finances was saved for last. Finances are usually the most personal element for an individual and often reveal the most about what he/she truly believes. For the most part, many people don't get taught how to manage their personal finance well and will suffer the consequences of poor choices. Having a second person to add to the financial illiteracy compounds the problem. Personally, if the engaged couple learned how to decently manage their finances, it would be a tremendous head start for their marriage. The following Worksheets from Prepare/Enrich are tremendously helpful for this discussion: The Meaning of Money, Priorities, Financial Goals, Budgeting, Achieving Your Goals Together. The last discussion would be about the couple's goals and seeing how it can be achieved through a joint effort. The final homework would be to create a viable budget for the couple's current financial situation.

Follow-up

If there is a particular discussion that might need a mediator, I would offer another session. A 1-year check-in session would also be offered for future consideration. Finally, a dinner invitation to my house will be made for the final evaluation of the session.

Works Cited

Olson-Sigg, A., & Olson, D. H. (2011). PREPARE/ENRICH Program for premarital and married couples.

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