

**Pre-Marital Strategy**

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MFT 509: Pre-Marital Counseling

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## Pre-Marital Strategy

My pre-marital strategy is a comprehensive 14-week 90 minute per session course that will take couples through the fundamentals of managing expectations, communication tools, conflict resolution, building intimacy and managing finances. This would equal about 21 hours of learning that the couple will have to internalize and practice these skills. The rate would be \$100/hr for 21-hour course. The downside for of such a comprehensive strategy would be the time and cost investment. I understand that many couples may feel they aren't able to "spend" that amount, but ultimately, this allocation of time and resources to their marriage will produce more fruit than anything else they decide to spend on for the wedding. Also, I worry that without a comprehensive strategy, couples may just be "going through the motions" or not getting a full scope of understanding for the commitment they are about to make. Lastly, couples typically spend over \$30,000 (*Wedding Cost Guide, n.d.*)

on the wedding day, without taking much thought about what life will look like once the party is over. A comprehensive pre-marital strategy will equip couples with tools to build their house on a foundation of rock vs. one of sand (Mathew 7:24-25 NIV).

Session 1 would consist of introductions, an overview of what they will experience, a discussion for what our expectations will be for each other as well as an assessment of their interactions. I would start with discussing what the couple could expect from me. I would ask them several questions about what they understand about pre-marital counseling, what they hope to gain from the process and what questions they may have. I would take this time to let them know that this pre-marital "counseling" is actually a pre-marital education that will provide them with the tools to build a strong foundation for their marriage. I would give them a

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little background about me and let them know that although I am a Christian and am happy to share from that perspective if they ask, my ultimate goal is to get them prepared for a healthy marriage and to meet them where they're at in their spiritual walk.

I will also share that while many Christian counselors have a "purity policy", I do not. As followers of Christ, it's my view that the Holy Spirit is the one who should convict us. My experience with others hurt by "purity culture" in the church has caused this to be something I don't want to perpetuate. That being said, Pastor Craig Groeschel of Life Church gave a great point about why it's prudent to abstain from sex before marriage that I would share. He explained that sex causes hormonal and chemical reactions that cause the body to be in essence "intoxicated." He pointed out that while "intoxicated" our ability to see clearly and make decisions is hindered. He also pointed out that during this time it's easier to dismiss any "red flags" that may be present. While this may be an oversimplified explanation of the science, the analogy makes sense. Couples may find it prudent to abstain from sex during this time to be clear headed about any red flags that may surface as well as to build their skills for emotional intimacy.

I would also emphasize for the couple that while the best outcome for this pre-marital strategy is a loving and connected marriage, the second-best outcome would be NOT getting into a marriage that was troubled before it started. I've seen many friends break off engagements and I know that it is always less expensive than the cost (financial and emotional) of divorce later.

I would let the couple know that while many Christians favor a strict hierarchy structure in marriage ("For wives, this means submit to your husbands as to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:22 NIV)

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I would remind them that when this scripture is misused it's often because the church forgets to teach verse 25 that says "For Husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word." (Ephesians 5:25 NIV). Most wives would be happy to "submit" to their husbands if he was treating her with the same love and reverence for which Christ treated the church. It would hardly even be a debate. If we approach the marital power struggle from this perspective, we see that sometimes the wife may "back down" out of submission to her husband and other times it will be the husband who backs down out of loving reverence for his wife. In fact, research has shown that a husband who honors and respects his wife, is more open to accepting influence from her, and thus connecting with her emotionally. These husbands are considered to be more emotionally intelligent (Gottman & Silver, 2015). Either way, this perspective preserves equal power between the husband and wife.

I would round out my discussions for what they can expect from me as a facilitator by informing the couple of my other policies. Which include no secrets, being open and honest, coming to session prepared, and policy for cancelations (min 24 hours' notice or there is a \$75 cancellation fee), lateness - more than 15 minutes late is treated as a cancelation, 15+ minutes late 3 or more times may result in a termination of the program.

The purpose of starting with this is so that the couple can get a feel for whether they think I'm the right facilitator for them. If they choose to move forward, they will know that I was transparent about all these views and policies from our first conversation. I've used this strategy many times in my real estate career when working with buyers and it has helped me build strong relationships and a sense of trust with my clients.

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I would end the last 45 minutes of the session connecting with the couple to learn their dating and engagement story. Not only does this help us to get to know each other but it also helps me to see how the couples remember the early days of their relationship. My last two exercises would include asking the couple to define marriage for them individually and as a couple. Then to list reasons for marrying and listing why they think their fiancé is marrying them. This exercise would be to determine any unhealthy reasons for getting married (Park, 2023).

In session 2 we will review the 4 marriage myths as noted in SYMBIS (p. 20) 1- We expect exactly the same things in marriage, 2- everything good in our relationship will get better, 3- Everything bad in my life will disappear, 4- my spouse will make me whole. We will follow this up by reviewing and sharing the strength and growth areas of the prepare-enrich assessment. The reason for this is that it's important for engaged couples to start to get an understanding for the realities of marriage before they become shocked and disillusioned by them later. Couples should be prepared to learn that each other's expectations need to be discussed before they can be discovered. Otherwise, it's like expecting our spouse to play the love interest in our own personal rom com but getting upset he isn't following the script we never gave him! It's also important for engaged couples to learn that marriage isn't a fairytale where we simply "live happily ever after". In *Saving Your Marriage Before it Starts* (SYMBIS) the authors point out that "it's an illusion that the romance in the beginning of a relationship will last forever." (Parrott, 2015, p.27) So often, married couples divorce because they fall out of romantic love and "grow apart" but never really took the time to intentionally grow together. Once we've discussed the myths of marriage, I will work with the couples to discover the

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strength and growth areas within their own marriage as noted in the prepare-enrich handbook. Their homework after this session is to complete the 5 love languages, and 4 tendencies assessment for our next session.

In Session 3 will cover the individual assessments based on various personality framework. I've chosen this for session 3 because I believe there is no growth without a healthy amount of self-awareness. I'll begin the session with the SYMBIS "Assessing your self-image" worksheet to understand if the couples know and like themselves. They can hardly have a full understanding of marital love if they haven't first been able to love themselves. I understand that this could be a difficult topic, therefore, if something comes up during this session or any other, that is specifically triggering, I will offer to either counsel them separately (once I am fully licensed) for a short time to work through the issue or refer them out to another MFT for that. We will follow that the individual assessment with the couples relational one by reviewing the Pre-enrich personality SCOPE and have the couple perform the scope out your personality exercise.

While I prefer the MBTI assessment, I'm not currently certified to administer that assessment so I will use SCOPE to help the couple gain a basic understanding of how personality differences can cause conflict or bring strength to their marriage. It will help couples to understand that their spouse doesn't have to be "wrong" just because he/she thinks differently. Learning to embrace these differences will be a great gift for their marriage. Next, I will have the couples review their answers for the 5 love languages assessment. I will help them to understand the importance of speaking their partner's love language and how filling each

other's their "love tank" (Chapman, 2015) could help shield the couple from negativity in the future.

Lastly, if time permits, I will have the couple review their results from the "4 Tendencies" assessment based on the book *The 4 Tendencies* by Gretchen Rubin. While this assessment doesn't particularly relate to marriages, it's based on the ideas that different people react to expectations differently and by learning someone's "tendency" you're able to have more success (or less frustration) in getting them to abide by an expectation. I noticed a huge change in my frustration level in my own marriage once I understood my husband's tendency. I've also found myself coaching my clients (I find a lot of fighting couples as I'm helping them buy houses) on understanding their own spouses' different tendencies. Their eyes usually light up when they realize it's simply a personality difference and not an intentional plan of their spouse to be difficult. The homework for this session will be to brainstorm ways they can fill each other's love tanks.

Sessions 4 & 5 will focus on intergenerational assessment. There are two sessions dedicated to studying this because of the importance of this topic and so that there is sufficient time to address the topic between the two families. Couples need to understand that they are not only marrying their spouse but also his/her family. Understanding the intergenerational dynamics will help couples to build compassion and empathy each other. We will start off with discussing the importance of family of origin then move into exploring the Prepare Enrich couple & family map followed by the SYMBIS unfinished business exercise. We will also review their genograms as well as work on the Legacies: Family Rules and Destructive traditions handouts.

Following the intergenerational assessment, we will go into marriage expectations in session 6. The reasoning for putting this here is that most expectations come from things we've learned from our families of origins. Once I've done some family of origin work with the couple, they will be primed to identify some expectations they may not have realized they had. We will do this by exploring the two SYMBIS exercises for making your roles conscious and your personal 10 commandments.

By session 7 the couples have been primed with hours of foundational work to build empathy, understanding and intimacy. The next set of sessions will focus on giving the couple tools to use when conversations get tough. Session 7 will focus specifically on healthy communication. I will have the couple focus on their assertive speech and active listening by teaching them to practice the speaker/listener technique (Stanley et al. 2014, p. 76) as well as making "I" statements. I will utilize the Prepare Enrich exercise for creating and sharing a wish list to accomplish this goal.

In session 8 we will discuss conflict resolution and anger management. We start with the Prepare Enrich exercise for 10 steps for conflict resolution. I will also teach the couple how to deescalate an argument by either taking a time out or attempting another "repair" as taught in the 7 Principals for Making Marriage Work (Gottman & Silver, 2015). Lastly, I will review the Do's and don'ts of anger management handout and relate that to what Gottman calls the "divorce predictors" of conflict which is a harsh start up followed by the 4 horsemen. He teaches that if a discussion has a harsh start up there is over a 90% chance it will escalate so it's better to start over another time. Then he talks about the 4 horsemen of the marriage apocalypse called criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. I think it's crucial for

couples to have an awareness of the 4 horsemen so they're able to recognize the signs if they begin to show up in their own marriage.

Session 9 will be a training in forgiveness. We will start by reviewing the "apology language" assessment based on the book "When Sorry isn't enough by Gary Chapman & Jennifer Thomas. I want couples to have a clear understanding of what forgiveness is and isn't. While they may not have much to forgive each other for at this early stage in their relationship, understanding forgiveness will be a vital step as they progress in their married lives. When they understand that holding onto unforgiveness is doing a disservice to themselves rather than to the other person they may begin to come around. I will also have them evaluate their forgiveness skills using the handout from Dr. Mecurio.

Sessions 10-12 will focus on intimacy. I believe this to be one of the most crucial elements of any marriage. The couple must feel physically, and emotionally safe with one another. For them to have a true intimate friendship. I think of Maslow's hierarchy of needs which points out that without basic safety, people can't move up to have higher levels of needs met. Once the couple has established that they can feel safe with each other they become free to be vulnerable and therefore truly intimate. Ideally, they would also experience spiritual intimacy. I know from experience that a couple is still able to have a fruitful marriage without a deep level of spiritual intimacy, but I would explain that while the couple is still engaged this is a great area to cultivate. I would use the prepare enrich exercises for spiritual beliefs for spiritual intimacy and Sex & affection for physical intimacy. For emotional intimacy, I would use the "I appreciate" (Gottman & Silver, 2015, p. 96) and "Cherishing Your Partner" (Gottman & Silver, 2015, p. 102) exercises from & principals for making marriage work. These exercises were

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meant to foster greater fondness and admiration for each other which are “two of the most crucial elements in a rewarding and long-lasting romance” (Gottman & Silver, 2015, p. 90). The authors also point out that “happy marriages are based on deep friendship” (Gottman & Silver, 2015, P. 40) and that “Friendship fuels the flames of romance because it offers the best protection against feeling adversarial to your spouse” (Gottman & Silver, 2015, p.41). The authors go on to describe Positive Sentiment Override (PSO). The key point of PSO is that it allows even fighting couples to recover much more quickly. It’s a mechanism for the couples being filled with grace for each other. Since they were filled with positive feelings, they are quicker to disregard small slights that might otherwise escalate. Gottman also points out that positive sentiment override is what makes the difference between healthy couples and unhealthy ones. He points out that while having good communication skills is helpful, it isn’t enough. I will spend the most time helping the couple to understand the importance of this intimacy. It is what will help their marriage grow from inflexible romantic love to mature love (Thomas).

I would round out the course with session 13 on Finances since money issues are one of the most common causes for divorce (Why People Divorce and What Are the Reasons for Divorce?, n.d.) This would be the final piece to help the new couple to build a strong foundation for their marriage. The last session would be to wrap up, answer any lingering questions, have the couple evaluate the process and decide whether they still want to move forward with the marriage. I feel really confident that these 21 hours of study will truly provide the couple with all the tools they need for a sound, mature, and lasting covenant.



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