

TAKING THE TIME TO TALK...

PRE-MARITAL COUNSELING

by Dr. Valerie Correa

You are thinking: "Pre-marital counseling? My day planner is already full and I'm already on an emotional roller coaster from planning this wedding. Don't ask me to do one more thing." Then you find out that to reserve the church or synagogue, you will need to participate in pre-marital counseling to explore compatibility.

You do not want to question your compatibility during this time of feeling stressed and vulnerable. It would be easy for you to present yourself as more compatible than you are during pre-marital sessions or minimize your differences just to get the task done. If you do this, you will be missing an opportunity to gain the benefits that pre-marital counseling can offer you. You have both worked hard to get to this place in your relationship to be ready for marriage, why limit your potential now? Hopefully, the following paragraphs will alleviate some of your concerns and motivate you to start off your marriage with a strong start.

ADDRESSING YOUR DOUBTS ABOUT COUNSELING:

- 1) *Do we really have to talk to someone we don't know?*

Once a session starts, you will be surprised how quickly you will feel at ease with a likeable and trustworthy therapist. If you feel uncomfortable with your therapist, choose someone else.

Therapeutic results are created through a good alliance.



Photography by Carol Harold, Seattle

- 2) *Is it worth our time?*

Seldom do we set aside time to cherish and develop our relationships. This is a great time for you to devote time to nurture your commitment. Also, you are not a passive participant in therapy; your actions, self-disclosure and honesty all play a part in the productivity of a session.

- 3) *Will they value our partnership?*

If a therapist is promoting oneself as providing pre-marital therapy, most likely, s/he believes in the strength of marriages and wants couples to fortify their relationship. If a therapist is fostering more insecurity than hope, then maybe they are not the right therapist for you.

- 4) *Are we going to stir things up?*

Expect the possibility; relationships are

vibrant, evolving and resilient. Spouses will always face challenges, conflicts will spark and growth will emerge. Therapy is an opportunity for the two of you to have a coach to help you deal effectively with challenges when they occur. If you believe you can handle adversity, you will be able to manage it when it arises. Believe in yourself, your partner and your marriage.

BENEFITS OF PRE-MARITAL COUNSELING:

- 1) *You will discuss topic areas that will influence your marriage.*

You will devote time discussing your individual views on: finances, spiritual beliefs and traditions, in-laws, social interests, sex, careers, whether you want children, and parenting beliefs.

- 2) *You can devote time to celebrate your strengths as a couple.*

A part of pre-marital counseling is focusing on how positive your relationship is and acknowledging that your relationship is, indeed, ready for marriage. You talk about the strengths of your partner and how your life will grow and improve by choosing your partner for marriage. These discussions reaffirm your commitment during a hectic time of planning and adjustment.

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HELP IN FINDING A PREMARITAL COUNSELOR

AAMFT (American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy) Professionally, those who are clinical members of AAMFT have had specific training in marital therapy. You can find a clinical member in your area at www.therapistlocator.net.

PREP (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program) A scientifically proven program for pre-marital counseling and divorce prevention. Denver researchers Markman & Stanley created two models (one secular and one spiritually based). Local therapists who have utilized these models can be found by contacting PREPinc@aol.com

AASECT (American Association of Sexual Educators, Counselors and Therapists). These professionals have specific training in sex therapy for couples. Get more information at: www.aasect.org.

3) *You can identify differences.*

Often, the first year of marriage is filled with the harsh realization of how different two people can be. Somehow, during dating, your partner did not seem so different from you but now, all the differences are glaring at you daily. Pre-marital counseling can highlight these differences ahead of time and begin to identify how they can complement each other or how they may be a catalyst for conflict.

4) *You can identify what you will need to take responsibility for in the relationship.*

By identifying what are one's strengths and weaknesses, the spouse who has strengths in one area will know ahead of time how they will need to carry their spouse's weaknesses and vice versa. For example, the organized spouse will have to organize more for the couple, while the spontaneous spouse may be the one who initiates activities for the couple. Each one can use their strengths to complement and enhance the other's weakness for the relationship to function optimally.

5) *Begin process of acceptance and change.*

Spouses can begin to accept which spousal characteristics are likely to change and which are not. This thwarts the process of unsuccessfully trying to change inherent qualities of your partner that are unlikely to change. When spouses engage in this activity it leaves them frustrated and feeling rejected. By doing this work before marriage, couples can pre-empt many future marital squabbles.

HOW TO MAXIMIZE COUNSELING:

- Choose a therapist you are comfortable with and you feel is fair.
- Go into sessions by focusing on yourself rather than your partner.
- Talk about the session afterwards; do work outside of session.
- Demonstrate support for one another. **PBC**