

1988

## Premarital counseling

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## Premarital counseling

### Abstract

As couples become engaged to be married and dream of a life together, many of them fail to take a realistic look at how the demands and stresses often associated with marriage will affect their "ideal" relationships. Prior to the wedding, romance often overshadows reality, and preparations for the wedding ceremony supersede reflection on the actual relationship (Giblin, 1994). In the media, relationships are reported to be idealistic, romantic or adventurous; yet, the USA has one of the highest marriage/divorce ratios of all industrialized nations (Bagarozzi & Rauen, 1981). According to Giblin (1994), forty to fifty percent of couples in the U.S. divorce within three years of marriage. This divorce rate appears to indicate that one in every two marriages will end in divorce (National Center for Health Statistics, 1989). O'Leary and Smith (1991) stated that approximately forty percent of all clients in mental health clinics indicated that marital problems are part of their difficulties. In fact, individuals seek help in mental health clinics for marital problems than for any other single client reported problem (O'Leary & Smith, 1991).

PREMARITAL COUNSELING

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Lisa D. Zimmerman  
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As couples become engaged to be married and dream of a life together, many of them fail to take a realistic look at how the demands and stresses often associated with marriage will affect their "ideal" relationships. Prior to the wedding, romance often overshadows reality, and preparations for the wedding ceremony supersede reflection on the actual relationship (Giblin, 1994). In the media, relationships are reported to be idealistic, romantic or adventurous; yet, the USA has one of the highest marriage/divorce ratios of all industrialized nations (Bagarozzi & Rauen, 1981). According to Giblin (1994), forty to fifty percent of couples in the U.S. divorce within three years of marriage. This divorce rate appears to indicate that one in every two marriages will end in divorce (National Center for Health Statistics, 1989). O'Leary and Smith (1991) stated that approximately forty percent of all clients in mental health clinics indicated that marital problems are part of their difficulties. In fact, individuals seek help in mental health clinics for marital problems than for any other single client reported problem (O'Leary & Smith, 1991).

Current statistics seem to indicate that most marriages will ultimately end in divorce. In light of these overwhelming odds, what can a couple do to prepare for marriage? Is premarital counseling an effective preparatory method for engaged couples? This paper will address these questions by offering a definition of premarital counseling, exploring the possible need for premarital counseling, evaluating the suggested elements of a premarital program and highlighting the needs and desires of couples who have participated in premarital counseling. This paper will conclude with a description of the next step for therapists in administering premarital counseling and education.

#### Premarital Programs and Education: Definition

Premarital education programs are defined as skills-training procedures which provide couples with information on ways to improve their relationships prior to marriage (Senediak, 1990). Premarital education programs are geared for "non clinical" rather than dysfunctional or problematic couples. Premarital interventions take place during the initial phases of family development with the goals centering on

prevention and education. They are time-limited programs which focus on educative or enrichment-oriented sessions. Premarital education programs aim to help couples understand and challenge unrealistic expectations they have for themselves and for their relationships. Premarital education programs cover the art of communication, negotiation, problem solving and decision making. Effective premarital preparation emphasizes creating an atmosphere conducive to meaningful dialogue within the couple's relationship and providing the couple with something concrete on which to work (Giblin, 1994). Bagarozzi and Rauen (1981) felt that goals of premarital counseling programs should include creating an orientation to developmental tasks such as communication and problem solving skills. The authors conclude that all couples must resolve these tasks successfully in order to enjoy a mutually rewarding life together.

#### The Need for Premarital Counseling

The rising divorce rate and couples' interest in relationship enhancement has led to an increase in premarital counseling and education programs (Giblin, 1994). This next section of the paper contains a

review of why premarital counseling should be incorporated into each couples' lives prior to marriage. Reasons include objectives such as building effective communication and problem-solving skills to enhance the marital relationship and evaluating realistic and unrealistic ideas about marriage and one's potential spouse.

Research indicates that premarital programs are an effective form of education that helps in reducing marital tensions which can lead to divorce (Bishop, 1993; Giblin, 1994; Markman, 1981). Wright (1994) discussed causes behind marital problems and stated that one of the most basic problems is neglected preparation for leaving the single lifestyle and moving into marriage. In order to make the transition smoother from the single lifestyle into marriage, Norem and Olson (1983) suggested that counselors provide educational and counseling programs for couples before marriage vows are exchanged. Research by Bishop (1993) and Wright (1994) indicated that most engaged couples agreed with Norem and Olson (1983) that couples can benefit from a marriage preparation program that will help couples identify issues and develop problem-



solving skills. Skill-based premarital intervention programs may not only help a couple maintain a healthy relationship, but may also help reduce the probability of divorce. William's (1992) research indicated that a couple's strongest incentive to participate in a marriage preparation program is to reduce the likelihood of divorce.

Markman, Floyd, Stanley, and Storaasli (1988) conducted research on premarital communication patterns and the teaching of effective communication and problem solving skills. These researchers found that couples who had been involved in premarital programs centering around enhancing effective communication skills were significantly less likely to dissolve their relationship three years post marriage. In the three year follow-up, only 5% of the couples in communication training separated, compared to 24% of the control group couples. In this study, when the two groups were compared, the intervention couples had higher levels of relationship satisfaction on a one-and-a-half year follow-up and at a three year follow-up. The relationship satisfaction of the intervention group was maintained, but the control group was beginning to

report emerging problem intensity and sexual dissatisfaction. According to these results, premarital intervention appeared to slow the decline in marital quality that occurs in most relationships over time.

Premarital counseling also appears to be a valuable resource for clients in evaluating if they are compatible. Often couples marry without taking a serious look at the relationship and the person they are marrying (Bararozzi & Rauen, 1981). Research has indicated that prior to marriage many engaged couples hold romantic ideas about married life as well as unrealistic expectations and assumptions about their future mates (Bagarozzi & Rauen, 1981). Larson (1992) found a significant cause for struggle in premarital expectations or beliefs in the decision of whom to marry. Many couples prior to marriage tend to overlook flaws in one another and, once married, experience difficulty in accepting growth or change (Senediak, 1990). Premarital relationships based on romantic love/infatuation often result in premature marriages before the individuals fully know each another. A counselor can utilize the romanticism of the premarital

couples in instigating change. Studies have shown a couple is more willing to change and will receive immediate rewards if this change is instigated while the couple is still in a happy and relatively well-functioning state of a relationship (Bishop, 1993; Markman et al. 1988; Williams, 1992). Markman and Hahlweg (1993) noted preventative programs which start with "happy" couples help the couples maintain their higher levels of functioning. Their research also indicated that therapeutic interventions help lessen the tension experienced by distressed couples rather than increase their level of happiness (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993).

One valuable aspect of premarital counseling is that it helps couples evaluate their romantic ideas of the opposite partner and marriage. Premarital counseling and education can be directed toward improving personal readiness and relationship strength. A premarital program can help a couple slow down and evaluate where their relationship is going. A person's beliefs about relationships serve as standards against which an individual evaluates the quality of his or her relationship. Engaged couples often do not critically

examine and evaluate their relationships before marriage (Bagarozzi & Rauen, 1981). When a person's relationship standards are unrealistic, irrational, rigid or extreme, the probability increases that his or her relationships will result in disappointment, disillusionment, and/or distress. Premarital counseling will help couples engage in conversations about personal and relationship strengths and weaknesses and how these may later relate to marital satisfaction (Larson, 1992).

By identifying factors relating to marital satisfaction, couples might begin to look at themselves, their partners and their overall potential for marital success. Bagarozzi and Rauen (1981) indicated that premarital programs should provide the opportunity for couples to evaluate and reconsider whether they are suited for one another and if they believe they can build a satisfying relationship together. Nickols, Fournier, and Nickols (1986) conducted a marriage preparation workshop which evaluated couples' personal and relationship issues. Using pre and post workshop assessments and follow-up questionnaires the researchers focused on communication

patterns, problem-solving skills, sexuality concerns, and financial matters. Areas of great improvement for the couples in the Nickols et al. (1996) workshop were in communication and sexual relationships. What these researchers found most beneficial to the couples is that premarital programs help couples evaluate if their potential mates were individuals with whom they want to live with for a lifetime. In the Nickols et al. (1986) study, couples who married after the workshop reported a seventy-one percent improvement between pre and post test scores. Couples who decided not to marry after the premarital program, when given pre and post tests, had a thirty percent deterioration in scores. These results support the effectiveness of premarital programs in helping couples evaluate their potential marriage partner.

#### Components in a Premarital Program

Studies of relationship development have indicated that factors such as poor communication, lack of problem-solving skills and dissatisfaction with interactions, when present premaritally or early in marriage, predict the development of relationship distress later in marriage (Markman, 1981). Premarital

topics generally include communication skills, problem solving, values clarification with some family-of-origin work, and sometimes sex education. Premarital research indicates that these topics will directly affect a couple's relationship and help reduce the various difficulties found in marital problems (Bagarozzi, Bagarozzi, Anderson, & Pollane, 1984; Parish, 1992; Senediak, 1990; Storaasli & Markman, 1990; Wright, 1994). This section will review the premarital research on effective and the necessary components that could be incorporated into a premarital program. Little or no research was found on the subject of sex education in premarital programs, so this topic will not be addressed.

#### Communication and Problem-Solving

One of the best predictors of marital satisfaction and a couple's ability to solve marital problems is the quality of the couple's communication (Larson, 1992; Quinn & Davidson, 1986). Bagarozzi et al. (1984) explained that open, clear communication is one aspect of marital satisfaction. The research shows successful marriages are those in which the partners are able to engage in noncoercive, goal-directed negotiations in

which both partners experience the exchange as fair and equitable. Studies indicated that the quality of premarital communication is one of the best predictors of marital outcomes (Bagarozzi et al., 1984; Bagarozzi & Rauen, 1981; Markman, 1981). It is not the couples' differences that matter as much as how the couples communicate and problem-solve the differences (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). Couples must learn how to argue constructively, rather than destructively. Without effective communication skills established first, constructive, positive problem-solving is an impossible act. Longitudinal studies have indicated that dysfunctional communication patterns and problem-solving skills precede the development of marital problems and that early signs of future distress are potentially identifiable in premarital interactions, independent of couples' levels of premarital satisfaction (Markman, 1981).

Premarital couples need to learn how to openly discuss expectations, wishes and desires to avoid later disappointment (Bagarozzi et al., 1984). Bagarozzi and Rauen (1981) discussed the importance communication plays in the development and maintenance of intimate

relationships and suggested that communication training is an essential skill incorporated in premarital counseling. Parish (1992) researched three groups of premarital communication styles. The groups consisted of a control group, a premarital assessment program group (PAP), and a couple's communication premarital assessment program group (CCPAP). This study indicated a significant difference of group effectiveness in communication from the test results between each program group. The most significant difference was the couple's perception of change and effectiveness in the CCPAP group. By showing how communication can effect a premarital couple's relationship, the results support the importance of incorporating communication skills training in premarital counseling.

By developing communication skills and problem-solving strategies during premarital therapy, couples will learn to overcome developmental crises when they arise (Bagarozzi & Rauen, 1981). Markman et al. (1988) developed a program which was specifically oriented toward reducing critical comments and encouraging constructive dialogue. From this premarital group therapy framework, Markman et al. (1988) discovered



that five 3-hour group sessions geared toward premarital education in effective communication and problem-solving were associated with greater marital satisfaction when assessed 1.5 and 3 years post marriage and compared to the original control group.

Ridley, Avery, Harrel, Leslie, and Dent (1981) conducted a study on communication and problem-solving skills for premarital couples. This study was developed to evaluate the effectiveness of an educational premarital program in training couples' communication and mutual problem solving skills. Two groups of premarital couples were established. One group participated in a problem-solving training program, and the other group participated in a relationship discussion. The results showed improved communication and problem-solving skills in both contrived and real problem situations within the experimental group as compared to the control group. This research suggested that premarital couples can learn and apply communication and problem-solving skills in their relationship. In follow-up studies conducted by Bagarozzi and Rauen (1981), couples who attended premarital counseling reported the skills

taught had a positive effect upon their relationship when confronting conflict openly in their marriage. The control couples continued to feel that confronting marital problems openly had either a neutral or negative effect on the marriage.

While couples need to learn communication skills in premarital counseling, the couples also need to learn how to negotiate conflict, problem-solve and make structural changes to dysfunctional patterns. Parish (1992) discovered that specific behavior skills need to be integrated, along with the discussion of relevant premarital issues. Most couples will encounter problems and disagreements; the critical factor in marital success is couple's ability to handle differences (Storaasli & Markman, 1990). Levinger (cited in Gottman & Krokoff, 1989) summarized the literature by saying that what counts in making a happy marriage is not so much how compatible couples are, but how couples deal with incompatibility.

#### Family-of-Origin

Along with communication and problem-solving, the couple's families-of-origin will have a large impact upon the marriage. It is within each person's family-

of-origin that morals, values, and roles are established. Couples who had been married for two years and who had attended a premarital program suggested that helpful information to be covered in premarital programs would be the influences that family myths and rules have on a developing relationship (Senediak, 1990). The advantage of incorporating a premarital program into engaged couples' lives is to help these couples in establishing their new family systems. It is useful for the couples to explore how it is they came to view certain issues as important. Part of establishing this new family system is understanding the past family system. The definition of roles and status of couples and family has been changing over several decades (Brubaker & Kimberly, 1993). Some of the obvious changes occurring with couples and families are their conceptions of the traditional family, redefinition of sex roles, frequency of cohabitation, high separation and divorce rates, and the decreasing influence of religion. These changes affect couples' behaviors and attitudes toward marriage and family life (Boisvert et al., 1995). Giblin (1994) felt that discussing the past of each

person's family-of-origin helps the individual become less susceptible to romanticism or blind idealism as compared to only discussing the couple's future. A discussion of each person's family-of-origin will help the couples identify the expectations and assumptions they learned from their families concerning marriage, especially the definitions related to each person's role in a marriage. This information is beneficial, for these expectations and assumptions will be carried into the couple's relationship.

Family backgrounds often differ, and this influences one's experiences, values and morals, and as a result, shape the way one relates to certain situations (Senediak, 1990). Wood and Stroup (1990) noted that people bring different life experiences to marriage. Newly married couples are often surprised at the impact of these experiences on their relationship. Any pathology that an individual brings into marriage will impede bonding (Wright, 1994). Wright (1994) felt that, in marital counseling, the counselor and couples should look at the relationship as having six people in every marriage. This accounts for both sets of parents and the couple. This also holds true for premarital

counseling. Silliman, Schumm, and Jurich (1992) found that most couples reported seeking information and help on marital issues from parents or memories of parental relationships. This exemplifies why exploration of family traditions, roles, values and morals is needed. Premarital couples can be helped to explore and understand different family life experiences as they build assumptions and expectations which create the new relationship.

#### Assessments

While it is important for couples to take a backward glance at their families-of-origin, it is also valuable to use some assessment tools developed for premarital counseling. Designing a program to fit the clients' needs can be used as an effective tool to draw the couple into the premarital counseling experience, and assessment tools can help structure the premarital sessions with topics of interest and discussions based on the couple's strengths and weaknesses. These tools are an effective method of designing a treatment plan specifically for the premarital couple's needs. A therapist needs to provide the couples entering a premarital program with an intake assessment prior to

the first session. This assessment can gather data on what the couples feel are important areas to cover in this program and areas of potential problems for the couples. Silliman et al. (1992) felt that a greater percentage of couples participated if programs requested their feedback and addressed issues of concern to them. Currently, the selection of materials and needs assessment for premarital preparation are most often based on provider perceptions rather than on client needs (Silliman et al., 1992).

Giblin (1994) stated that the two most widely researched assessments, found to be the most beneficial to the therapist and engaged couple, are Focus and Prepare/Enrich. Focus and Prepare/Enrich both assess the individual's knowledge of himself or herself and of his or her partner (Giblin, 1994). These instruments measure each person's expectations and strengths and growth areas in the relationship. A therapist can then use the results of these instruments to facilitate the couple's discussion in specific, concrete ways. These assessments will then help the therapist in knowing which areas of this couple's relationship may need work. Nickols et al. (1986) found that pre and post

test results from the Prepare marital inventory indicated that couples' scores do improve after a premarital program. Nickols et al. (1986) cited improvement in relationship development, communication, sexuality, children, and marriage for couples having used Focus or Prepare/Enrich to facilitate the premarital program. The use of these assessments have also indicated favorable results in a three-year longitudinal study. The Larsen and Olson (1989) study used the premarital inventory Prepare with a three-year follow-up. These results indicated that marital status could be predicted using Prepare scores in the areas of realistic expectations, personality issues, conflict resolution, communication, leisure activities, family, friends and religious orientation. These assessment tools can help the therapist design a marriage enhancement program that best fits the couple's needs. Research on areas to cover in premarital programs indicate that combining counseling, assessment tools and education influences couples in discussing marital issues and in learning practice skills which will enhance the relationship (Bagarozzi et al., 1984; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Nickols et al., 1986).

### What Couples Want in Premarital Counseling

Therapists have found through research that a premarital program needs to include communication and problem-solving skills training, an evaluation of the couple's family-of-origin and assessment tools. However, couples have indicated that, while they feel these topics are important, these topics are not what interests them in receiving premarital counseling. Some premarital counselors feel that since engaged couples are often idealistic about their mates and the future, it is best to design a program based on the counselor's training and knowledge of what research indicates builds a successful marriage (Williams, 1992). Relatively few studies have been conducted on young adults' perceptions of married life and their interest in premarital counseling topics. Boisvert et al. (1995) felt that premarital counseling programs did not sufficiently consider the premarital couples' perceptions about married life or their interest in the different themes addressed. Professionals in the mental health field need to increase their knowledge of premarital couples' perceptions and interests to be



able to go beyond the current limits of premarital counseling programs.

Most premarital couples believe that marriage preparation programs are beneficial (Wright, 1994), but many do not become involved in premarital counseling without a mandate (Williams, 1992). In the Boisvert et al. (1995) study, only nineteen percent of the respondents indicated they would voluntarily seek premarital counseling. Most couples receive premarital counseling because a church requires it and participation takes place in church-offered programs. Although this counseling is a good activity for all engaged couples to participate in, an outside therapist does not have the ability or leverage to mandate premarital counseling (Williams, 1992). Due to this current structure of obtaining premarital counseling, most couples look at these programs as a requirement, instead of free choice for growth and learning. Silliman et al. (1992) found that free choice has a more profound influence on creating and establishing positive marital-enhancing behaviors than coercion. With "free choice" being the ideal state-of-mind to enter premarital counseling, counselors need to be

aware of what the couples want in order to motivate participation. This next section will contain an examination of what couples want to address, who couples want to conduct sessions, and the format and length couples most prefer.

Williams (1992) and Boisvert et al. (1995) found that most couples feel marriage preparation programs should address communication, money/finance, problem-solving, children, religion, careers, sex and family/in-laws. These findings are generally consistent with what most of the premarital counseling literature indicated as important areas. The contradiction arises in asking couples what topics would be of most interest in a premarital program. While most feel communication and other well-researched areas are important topics to cover, they do not find these topics interesting. Hence, this lowers couples' interest and desire to attend a premarital program. Boisvert et al. (1995) and Geiss and O'Leary (1981) assessed topics young adults (single, cohabiting and married) would like addressed in premarital counseling. When these individuals were asked what specific needs or skills they wanted addressed, the responses differed

from the research. The top five responses for Geiss and O'Leary (1981) were:

1. How to deal with stress from work.
2. What effect having children has on a marriage.
3. How to keep romance alive.
4. How to deal with anger and silence.
5. How to resolve differences and identify trouble signs.

In the Boisvert et al. (1995) study, the individuals ranked the top ten problem areas considered to be the most damaging to a relationship. The top ten results were:

1. Physical abuse;
2. Communication;
3. Alcoholism;
4. Extramarital affairs;
5. Incest;
6. Jealousy;
7. Lack of loving feelings;
8. Sex;
9. Money management/finances; and
10. Problem behavior other than alcoholism.

Boisvert et al. (1995) correlated data on preferred topics to be addressed in premarital counseling from their study on Canadian couples and from the Silliman and Schumm (1989) study of American college students. The combined results indicated the preferred topic to be parenting skills. The topics of least interest were spiritual development, relationships with in-laws, and time management. The top ten in the correlated studies were:

1. Parenting skills;
2. Adapting to the arrival of the first child;
3. Expressing emotions;
4. Helping the partner to solve personal problems;
5. Listening effectively;
6. Sexuality;
7. Learning to solve personal problems;
8. Resolving differences;
9. Developing intimacy; and
10. Managing money.

A therapist needs to consider these topics of interest to the couples to increase client participation in a premarital program.

Not only do couples have ideas about what they want offered in their premarital education, they preferred marriage preparation to be structured as counseling with a minister, weekend retreats, meeting with a married couple or small group discussion. The least favorite methods were counseling by a therapist, lecture/classes, reading a book or completing a workbook (Williams, 1994). Williams (1994) postulated that couples disliked counseling with a therapist due to the stigma associated with seeing a counselor, whereas premarital counseling through a church is the "popular," accepted choice. He also found that counseling with a therapist was most preferred by those indicating "slightly religious to not religious" and least preferred by those "very religious." In contradiction to Williams (1992), Silliman et al. (1992) found that couples indicated inclusion or substitution of private trainers or teachers more desirable or equally desirable to clergy-run programs. Couples in their study preferred the format to include a fair degree of flexibility and time for dialogue, which is facilitated with a therapeutic intervention style (Silliman et al., 1992). Silliman et al. (1992)

discovered that, while small group programs are successful, the significant preference is a couple-therapist format.

Silliman et al. (1992) also found that couples attending six to eight intensive sessions have reported marked improvement in their relationship as compared to those who attended fewer sessions. In Silliman's et al. (1992) research, they found couples to be most interested in attending the shorter marriage preparatory programs. Hence, the suggestion from Silliman et al. (1992) was to offer a six session format as a basic "package," in which couples had to participate in four to five sessions. Once the required sessions were completed, couples had an option of extending counseling for two to three more in-depth sessions.

#### Research Deficits

With all of this research on what needs to be incorporated into premarital counseling, one wonders why premarital counseling is not something all couples participate in as a required condition to receiving a marriage license. Premarital research has indicated what will be of value to premarital couples and what

premarital couples want, but very few studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of premarital counseling. One difficulty in evaluating premarital counseling and education is that many programs remain unpublished and lack a similar format of educational materials or objectives. This creates problems in comparing and qualitatively assessing the value of such programs (Senediak, 1990). There is a lack of evidence within the research to support that participating in premarital counseling reduces the incidence of separation and divorce, and there is little data that premarital counseling helps prevent bad marriages from taking place. O'Leary and Smith (1991) stated that research is needed on effective ingredients of premarital programs as well as comparative outcome research. There are few articles addressing the long-term effects of premarital counseling. Researchers need to conduct longitudinal studies on married couples who have participated in premarital counseling. The testing conducted at the end of a premarital program may give information on the participants' perceptions

of the program, but fails to examine how the couples apply the skills once they are married (Senediak, 1990).

Researchers find it is difficult to ascertain what changes occur as a result of premarital intervention once a couple is married (Bagarozzi et al., 1984; Bishop, 1993; Larsen, 1992; Markman et al., 1988; Wright, 1994). Fifty percent of all first marriages end in divorce, with two thirds of these divorces occurring within the first ten years of marriage (National Center for Health Statistics, 1988). Long-term follow-up should extend beyond ten years of marriage. Short-term follow-up does not give enough indication of marital longevity. No longitudinal studies have been conducted on outcome research beyond six years to assess long-term effects of premarital counseling (Bishop, 1993). Markman et al. (1988) reported that while premarital counseling is an effective tool to evaluate compatibility within couples, there is little data to suggest this form of premarital intervention produces positive consequences later in marriage.



Reviews of the literature suggest that effective communication is a significant predictor of future marital satisfaction. However, not all premarital programs offer communication as an established activity. This indicates the need to publish premarital programs, create similar premarital education guidelines and compile results from ten-year (or longer) longitudinal studies. As indicated earlier in the paper, couples, therapists and researchers feel premarital counseling is beneficial. Premarital counseling now needs conclusive data to support therapists, couples and these earlier researchers.

#### Future Therapeutic Roles

With the rising costs of providing quality mental health care, combined with the current divorce rate and quality of life concerns for mental health care providers, there is a need for effective preventative programs which assist couples in developing healthy interactional patterns (Parish, 1992). Duncan and Markman (1988) summarized this fact by writing that marital and family distress is a major social problem and that successful prevention programs can save on personal, social and economical costs. While

prevention programs are available for the public, Silliman et al. (1992) found that many premarital couples have a limited perspective of the potential role of the therapist or of premarital counseling. Yet these couples still recognize the need to open up their relationship to the guidance of an outsider. Mental health professionals can best serve the premarital clientele and the mental health profession by listening to the consumers of their services and tailoring the premarital counseling, to some degree, to the expressed needs of the population. In doing this, they will be providing quality care to the clientele and hopefully eliminating future marital distress, thus helping couples save on personal, social and economical costs of the future.

To address these costs, a variety of human service providers can help meet the expressed needs of the population. Some providers include clergy, physicians and private therapists or educators to help couples with insights into the relationship (Silliman et al., 1992). Premarital counseling should be perceived as a collaboration of efforts where there is an exchange of expertise through periodic meetings of all sources. As

of now, clergy do a majority of premarital counseling, but most feel ill-prepared to help couples properly prepare for marriage (Giblin, 1994). Clergy need to be better prepared to do premarital counseling. This training also needs to extend to the lay people allowed to facilitate marriage preparation. A therapist can become involved with premarital counseling through the church, being used as a referral source by clergy, donating time to the church for therapy, working in the pastor's place, or coordinating premarital counseling in churches that allow lay people to do the marriage preparation (Williams, 1992). Results of Silliman's et al. (1992) research suggested that therapists might perform a valuable role as consultants to clergy on marital roles and skills. They suggested that networking will provide the maximum benefit for providers and clients. A major task in premarital programs is to educate the public about this service and to reach the groups who need these programs the most.

A futuristic change addressed in the literature was to extend premarital counseling into the first year of marriage. Giblin (1994) felt premarital counseling

should continue into the first year of marriage. This aspect of premarital preparation would continue in a group context, focusing on skill-building and creating supportive peer relationships. Conducting premarital counseling into the first year of marriage would allow for the couples' perceptions of one another and the relationship to change. In that first year of marriage, the awareness of differences increases, the need for skills is immediate, patterns are somewhat flexible, and unresolved issues or conflicts have not accumulated, making this an ideal time for counseling centering on relationship enhancement (Giblin, 1994). By continuing counseling throughout this first year of marriage, couples would be able to enhance healthy, productive marital communication and problem-solving patterns as problems arise.

Premarital counseling can also help build a supportive climate for later marital therapy as well as reduce marital distress by the couple's willingness to consult with a therapist (Silliman et al., 1992). Bishop (1993) felt that positive premarital counseling experience will motivate couples to seek therapy later in the marriage.

### Conclusion

Today's standard approach to marital distress is to intervene after problems develop. By that time, negative aspects of these problems have affected spouses and children. Premarital counseling can help detect future problem areas and teach couples tools to effectively handle problems as they arise. Intervention at an early stage of a couple's relationship can be helpful at identifying and rectifying trouble spots. Premarital education is essential, because once dysfunctional patterns form they are hard to modify (Markman et al., 1988). Greater attention should be focused on preventing marital problems before distress develops. Intervention can help provide couples with constructive advice which can help them build more successful and happier marriages.

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