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Premarital Counseling and Education Effectiveness

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### Abstract

Premarital counseling and education have both been used as an exclusive tool to give couples skills to better their future marriage. Before entering into marriage, couples have the opportunity to discuss potential barriers and areas of conflict in the relationship with a professional who can help guide them in the right direction. This research examines the goal of premarital counseling, those who attend it, the effectiveness of the counseling, and if it helps prevent divorce among married couples. Premarital counseling has shown to be effective in preparing couples to enter into marriage and retain a healthy and stable union. Many couples seem to find strengthening of their relationship through taking part in premarital counseling and education. They are becoming more prepared for their marital commitment and responsibilities. This research has shown that couples who willingly participate in premarital counseling are more united, defeating divorce odds, and experiencing more marital satisfaction.

## Premarital Counseling and Education Effectiveness

The view on marriage has changed drastically over the past years. Now many couples are deciding to wait until they reach an older age to marry, or decide to refrain from marrying at all (Britzman & Sauerheber, 2014). With the significance of marriage being lost, many couples are seeking out and are in need of premarital counseling to prepare for the difficult road ahead. I have explored many aspects of this concept including who it is meant for, what its primary goal is, if it is effective for relationships, and if it should continue to be used in the future. In doing so, I have found that today many people are fighting for their marriages before they enter into them. In educating themselves, they are preparing for a battle in which the whole world seems to be against them.

### Attendants

#### Commitment

A heavy desire weighs on the hearts of most American adults. This desire is a healthy and stable marriage (Kruenegel-Farr et al., 2013). In having this aspiration, commitment must be a prevalent part of the relationships in order to begin to reach this goal. In fact, the level of commitment within a relationship is the best judge of couples who have interest in participating in premarital counseling (Blair & Córdova, 2009). When couples have a strong connection and genuine commitment towards each other, they often plan ahead for their future together.

Premarital education programs often have attendees who are not only committed to each other, but also make the commitment to improving and refining their marriage before they actually get married (Blair & Córdova, 2009). The majority of attendees in premarital counseling, or education, have this commitment quality. When a couple makes a commitment to each other, to spend their lives together, they typically do this through a proposal and getting

engaged. Since engaged couples have openly expressed their commitment, they are the prime clients of premarital counseling (Williams, 1992). It is clear that commitment plays a large part in selecting who participates in premarital education and counseling. However, it is not the only avenue in which couples find this service.

### **Mandatory**

Many couples have this longing to better prepare themselves for marriage. On the other hand, many do not see the need. Couples are more likely to participate in premarital counseling if it is required of them (Williams, 1992). If this is the case, they may not be fully getting everything out of the experience that they have the potential to. A lot of this might be due to the attitude they have going into the program because it is forced upon them to participate. It is not often that couples come to premarital counseling with a willing attitude. They lack the belief that this will be helpful and prepare them for a better marriage (Williams, 1992). This is very discouraging. Divorce rates are high and marital satisfaction is low in the country. One would think that couples would want to do everything in their power to decrease their chances of divorce and increase their happiness within marriage. However, this is not the case for everyone. Some individuals may be able to better see what lies ahead and have the motivation to enhance it.

Clearly, commitment enhances premarital counseling experiences. There is a certain level of authenticity already there. This makes moving forward into exploration of the relationships much smoother and more simple. Although there are individuals who choose and those who are required, many participants have preferences of their own when it comes to the counseling experience. Several prefer premarital counseling after getting engaged that is short in length (Tambling & Glebova, 2013). When it comes to topics of discussion within counseling, couples

prefer to discuss topics concerning communication and the resolution of conflict within the relationship. (Tambling & Glebova, 2013). Individuals in committed relationships have preferences of details within the services that they receive before marriage. This is acceptable, but participants must be open-minded in their expectations of what they will gain from the experience.

## **Participants**

Premarital counseling or education can be effective for anyone who takes part in it as an individual or a couple. This includes a span of many ages, ethnicities, and social economic statuses (Kruenegel-Farr et al., 2013). Benefits of premarital counseling and education are not limited to specific races, incomes, or levels of education obtained by a couple. Participating in such programs can be valuable for couples belonging to any group, including those from various backgrounds (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). With all of this being said, there are no limitations to who can benefit or gain from premarital counseling. Despite backgrounds, history, or anything else, couples can gain from this learning experience before committing to a life of marriage.

## **Goal**

### **Counseling Definition**

Premarital counseling and education have the purpose of serving people, and specifically couples entering into a lifetime commitment. Healthy marital relationships are associated with skills taught by these programs in which clients learn in a nonthreatening environment (Blair & Córdova, 2009). The key here is the environment in which couples feel comfortable. They need a safe place to share their feelings in without judgment or persecution. In this secure environment, clients are invited to gain tools to help them effectively maintain a healthy relationship and long

lasting, fulfilling marriage (Kruenegel-Farr et al., 2013). In this service, many couples learn things about their partner that help strengthen the relationship. This assists in uniting them for their entrance into the adventure and journey of marriage.

### **Aim and Topics**

All premarital programs, such as counseling and education, have a similar goal in mind. Premarital counseling does not only provide couples who may not be very dedicated an opportunity to improve their bond. It also allows couples that are deeply committed, to live out this commitment to each other and continue to expound upon the already healthy relationship (Blair & Córdova, 2009). There are multiple ways of going about reaching these premarital counseling goals. When reaching for these goals, counselors utilize the topics of communication between partners, resolution of conflict, commitment, and managing expectations as parts of discussion (Blair & Córdova, 2009). In tackling these difficult topics of conversation, couples are pushed to their limits in a gentle way. Talking through these issues among couples allows them to look at their relationship, see where they need improvement, learn how to apply the tools they are given, and then finally, apply them in their everyday lives.

### **Effectiveness**

#### **The Need**

One of the biggest questions that is asked when it comes to premarital counseling, and any human service for that matter, is if people who may need it the most actually attend. This highly limits how effective the counseling is. Couples that are at high risk for marital problems in the future need to attend premarital programs. As a result, these programs become more effective for the audience they are trying to reach. Many people may be more likely to attend if they were more aware of the risk that they are susceptible to. Unfortunately, these couples who

are at higher risk for future marital issues are not highly represented within those who attend premarital education (Halford, O'Donnell, Lizzio, & Wilson, 2006). One of the most disappointing realizations is that few couples engage in this opportunity that they have to grow and learn together before entering into marriage (Tambling & Glebova, 2013). In order for premarital counseling to be effective, couples must partake in it. This specifically pertains to couples that need it the most.

### **Counselor Influence**

Counselors play a large role in setting the mood and environment in which counseling becomes effective. The positive outlook of counselors, or educators, reflects on the clients. Those attending counseling are highly influenced by professionals who they look to when desiring help with their future marriage. A warm, positive attitude of counselors can help motivate couples. Counselors can introduce a sense of hope and participate promoting success of the marriage (Britzman & Sauerheber, 2014). As mentioned previously, it is all about the environment and the tone set within that environment to welcome clients. It is clear that counselors and educators influence couples by the advice or guidance they give. Also, in how they listen and acknowledge the feelings and thoughts of their clients, counselors can help bring much life change.

### **Benefits**

Positive change is the main goal and primary benefit of counseling of couples before marriage. Counseling and therapy approaches of premarital education have the greatest result of positive change within the relationships of couples that participate (Kruenegel-Farr et al., 2013). Taking part in marriage preparation allows for many positive benefits for couples. These gains include ones for the participants as individuals and as a unit. In fact, according to Duncan,

Childs, and Larson (2010), “participants in marriage preparation [are] better off than 79% of nonparticipants.” It is evident that premarital counseling has benefits and a lot to offer for everyone who participates.

There are a multitude of benefits clients receive during this experience. Among these are communication and conflict management skills, a greater level of commitment, positivity, and a smaller probability of divorce later on (Duncan et al., 2010). In addition to these benefits, premarital education involvement is directly correlated with high marital satisfaction and low conflict within the relationship (Stanley et al., 2006). The reputation that premarital counseling and education has speaks for itself. Each case is unique every for couple however, many of the outcomes are also similar in what the participants report to have experienced. The results couples have from premarital counseling are life altering, life enhancing, and often crucial to relationships between spouses.

### **Later Help-Seeking**

Later help-seeking is the concept of receiving help, and then needing it again later along in life. This is not intended for couples when they begin premarital counseling. Actually, these interventions have the purpose of preventing distress and enhancing satisfaction in the relationship and, as a result, reducing the necessity of couples counseling later on (Williamson, Trail, Bradbury, & Karney, 2014). This is not always the case. In actuality, many couples that participate in premarital programs are more likely to take part in couples counseling once they are married (Williamson et al., 2014). Many people have inclinations to participate in counseling, after premarital counseling, once they are married. This is not something that people should look down upon or steered away from. Counseling once married can be very beneficial for a couple when reality and difficult times hit.

According to Williamson and colleagues (2014), premarital education can be a chance to partake in future help-seeking resulting in a positive effect on satisfaction within marriage.

Reinforcing positive mindsets, helpful tools, and useful skills will not hurt a marriage. Marriage counseling would just continue to help the relationship and make it more satisfying. Seeking help again does not necessarily mean that something is wrong with the marriage. It does mean that that couple knows the right steps to take in striving for a healthy relationship throughout the rest of their lives.

### **Preventing Divorce**

Divorce is one of the most well known issues in households throughout the United States. There are many things that contribute to these separations, each being unique to the couple's circumstances. The most common among these are lack of commitment to one's partner, infidelity, and experiencing conflict and arguing (Scott, Rhoades, Stanley, Allen, & Markman, 2013). Fortunately, premarital counseling has taken this battle against divorce head on. Britzman and Sauerheber (2014) suggest that couples should focus on modeling after those who are experienced in healthy marriages instead of concentrating on not letting things get bad enough to lead to separation or divorce. Premarital counseling is just one of many avenues to begin tackling risk factors that are related to pain among couples and, ultimately, divorce (Tambling & Glebova, 2013). There are many other options available for couples that are in need. Counseling is one of the many ways couples attain professional help while in distress and before reaching the point of considering divorce as a route of action.

### **Conclusion**

A great question that is often asked is if premarital counseling should continue to be practiced. Many people may wonder if the money, time, and effort put into it is worth it.

According to all I have found and explained above, the answer is yes. Successes of premarital counseling have shown to be effective. There are many risks that couples take when entering into a committed relationship. These risks include a strained relationship, infidelity, and divorce. All of these factors greatly need to be addressed in order to save a marriage. Specifically, taking steps ahead of time with premarital counseling can save couples a large amount of pain and conflict. Many couples have admitted that they wish they had participated in such education or counseling prior to marriage. However, they cannot go back and change that decision or the repercussions of it. Timing, when it comes to preventing distress and the possibility of divorce, is critical in all marriages.

Scott and colleagues (2013) believe that couples gain more out of premarital counseling when they seek out the assistance themselves rather than being pushed to attend. Couples may not seek it when they truly need it the most. They could be blind to their needs or in denial about the issues they face. Another possibility is that they may not have anyone to encourage them to do it. Couples could lack support from friends and family. Not to say that successful marriages depend on premarital counseling or education, but they can greatly benefit from it. Many couples are experiencing these benefits and are more easily entering into a marriage consisting of harmony and unity.

A fitting analogy is finding cancer inside of the human body. The goal is to catch and eliminate it early before it becomes a larger problem than it should be. It could spread, become unstoppable, and become detrimental to the person who is dealing with it. The same goes for marriages. Issues need to be addressed ahead of time as best they can. This includes participation of both partners. There is a strong necessity for the strengthening of relationships and marriages. This strength and resolution can be found through premarital counseling or education. Couples

can be more prepared for the wonderful, yet sometimes difficult, lifetime commitment they are entering into. As a beautiful result, couples are becoming more unified as one, beating the odds of divorce, and having higher satisfaction with their spouse through the course of the rest of their lives.

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