

IS MARRIAGE PREPARATION (or PRE-MARITAL COUNSELING) FOR YOU?

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Think marriage preparation is just for people with problems? Think again. According to a study by the University of Denver's Center for Marital and Family Studies, nearly one-third of all couples undergo some kind of premarital counseling -- and as far as we're concerned, you've got nothing to lose, everything to gain.

"There's a movement to provide marriage-building skills," says Michele Weiner-Davis, a marriage and family therapist in Woodstock, Illinois, and the author of *Divorce Busting* (Fireside, 1993). "Being in love and staying in love is an ongoing process; it takes maintenance. You'll strengthen your chances of staying together if you learn the skills needed."

This is especially relevant in today's climate; with divorce so prevalent, many couples don't have role models to follow. "Love doesn't conquer all," says Weiner-Davis. "There are people who study what it takes to make a relationship work. Why not benefit from what they know?"

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Pre-wedding counseling has one distinct advantage: Learning how to communicate and work through problems is a lot easier before rather than after the wedding. Once you're married, you both already have unspoken expectations for each other, never mind the often wacky ideas you got growing up about what married life should be like. Before marriage, you're still in a building stage -- the expectations are there, but it's easier to be open about the issues that threaten difficulty. And by learning how to talk through differences, you will form good habits that will carry you through the years.

There are several ways to tackle this sticky subject. You might decide to visit a psychologist or marriage and family therapist to thrash out issues that plague you. But you may not even have to go that far: Most houses of worship require to-be-weds to participate in counseling sessions before they'll let you march down their aisles.

That was the case for my husband and me. Our priest asked us to sign up for Pre-Cana, the Catholic version of premarital counseling. And what I originally imagined as a gorgeous spring day wasted indoors became an incredibly useful tool that we still rely on today, after almost three years of marriage.

During an all-day session, we were encouraged to talk about subjects we hadn't yet examined very thoroughly -- children, our feelings about religion, setting lifetime priorities. Through the process of answering "test questions," I felt like we were simulating a lifetime of events before our life together even began. Now, when crisis arises, I'm more confident and have a better sense of how and why Matt might react, because I have a better idea of how he thinks.

Liz Paone, a Pittsburgh bride, also counts her experience as a positive one. "The retreat sponsored by our church confirmed what I already thought I knew about my fiancé, which was reassuring. The counselors proposed topics that you probably wouldn't otherwise address until a situation was staring you in the face. It was like practice. We answered questions in essay format, then compared notes. Amazingly, we agreed on almost everything."

OUT THE ISSUES

Marriage preparation can help you recognize where your partner stands on a variety of topics, and where his or her priorities lie, which will confirm your sense of yourselves as a couple -- or, in some cases, open your eyes to the fact that you might be making a mistake. "The exercises were very revealing," Liz says. "In fact, one couple in our group decided not to get married after the retreat." (A terrifying thought, we know, but don't let this worry you. If that's what you end up finding out, you're both going to end up happier in the long run!)

What's there to talk about? Intimacy, children, finances, habits, and family issues, among other things. And even if you generally communicate well, there may be specific issues you'd like some help working through. Paula Popp, a marital and family therapist counseled one engaged couple with potential in-law problems: The man wanted to build their new home practically in his parents' backyard -- his fiancée wanted more breathing space. They talked to Popp about their ideals and needs, and were able to compromise by building a home in a nearby community. He recognized her need for autonomy as a couple, and she understood that it was important to him to maintain a close relationship with his parents.

FACE THE FACTS

So how do you know if premarital counseling is for you? "It depends on your existing ability to communicate with each other," says Popp. "Every marriage presents difficulties and obstacles, and communication will be what helps you overcome them." If you have trouble talking through the issues in your lives -- and we mean really talking -- it's smart to learn how to do it now, when you're engaged.

FINAL THOUGHT

Weiner-Davis urges couples to look at marriage realistically -- it's not all wine and roses. "People shouldn't just promise to be together no matter what. They should promise to work through problems, because all marriages, even the best ones, will encounter problems."