

Making a Case for Premarital Education Jonathan M. Lasson Psy.D.

With the divorce rate seemingly at an all time high, couples are in desperate need for mental health services. While marital therapy can assist couples in working out their differences, it is prudent to try and prevent issues from becoming too difficult to resolve prior to marriage. To this end, many individuals seek some form of premarital education or counseling. The problem that arises is an age old issue. The couples who need the counseling the most are usually the ones who do not access premarital counseling as a source of help. It is more often that couples who are very comfortable with each other but would like additional information and practical marriage advice that enter into premarital counseling. W. Kim Halford and colleagues address this issue in their article Do Couples at High Risk of Relationship Problems Attend Premarital Education? (Halford et. al. 2006). They found that couples who demonstrated certain risk factors such as being nonreligious and cohabitating prior to marriage were underrepresented as participants in premarital education programs. Since these are groups that are considered high risk groups for marital deterioration, it is important to encourage them to take the high road and seek help prior to committing to marriage.

Less than one third of marrying couples attend pre-marital education in the U.S. (Sullivan and Bradbury, 1997). Why is this the case? There are several factors that might account for the low attendance rate. Religious non-affiliation is seemingly most prominent. Since large numbers of premarital education seminars and workshops are led by members of the clergy, those who are not affiliated with a religious organization are less likely to participate. There are also time constraints. Wedding preparations seem to take precedence over the important task of mentally preparing for marriage. Additionally, individuals in low socioeconomic brackets are less likely to seek premarital education due to lack of finances or availability of these services to them.

How can attendance in premarital education programs be increased? The obvious thought would be to make it mandatory for couples to attend prior to receiving a marriage license. This has been attempted in several states but with very little success. Oklahoma has a marriage initiative with incentives offered to defray costs of premarital education. However, those that would make it a requirement might end up deterring couples from marrying or more likely to force couples to seek out churches or synagogues that do not make premarital education a prerequisite. I have heard from several members of the clergy that couples who are asked to attend premarital education classes will seek out a member of the clergy who does not make premarital education a requirement in order to avoid attending.

Modern day advancements along with incentives can help improve the accessibility of premarital educational programs. Online programs can certainly help reduce the costs and time associated with premarital education programs. It also affords some level of anonymity for couples. Some couples with unresolved issues would feel more comfortable discussing their needs when it is done in this manner. Incentives such as

dismissing the cost of obtaining a marriage license for attendees can also boost attendance.

I always believed that the term premarital *counseling* gives over the connotation that something is already wrong with the relationship. When marrying couples hear this term, it might scare them from attending classes. To this end, I always inform interested couples that I conduct premarital *education* seminars. Education is far less threatening than counseling.

It is also important to avail marrying couples of premarital education in different formats. Some couples are comfortable in a group setting while others would prefer the privacy of meeting without the presence of others. Additionally, many couples would prefer an educator who is not a member of the clergy. Priests and rabbis might be intimidating to couples. Couples may perceive them as imposing certain values that they do not agree with. This factor might also hinder cohabitating couples from attending due to the perceived displeasure that clergy might have over the fact that they have lived together prior to marriage.

In summary, I believe that we, as mental health professionals can encourage couples to seek premarital education. Offering seminars and workshops in areas where the low socioeconomic levels prevent participation can help boost attendance and possibly prevent relationship deterioration. Availing individuals to other formats of premarital education will also prove beneficial in helping couples access this much needed resource.

References

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