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Premarital Counseling and It's Grave Impact upon Marriages

“Failing to prepare is like preparing to fail” (Olson and DeFrain 477). Elaborating more on this quote, take something as simple as a class speech, for example. If there is no effort put forth in preparation of the future event, it very well could lead to situations where the speaker may falter or fail. Obviously something as minute as a speech is not going to be a pertinent, life changing event depending on the outcome, but something as big as a marriage is. This quote from Olson and DeFrain’s textbook entitled Marriage and Families: Intimacy, Diversity, and Strengths paints a clear picture for the importance of premarital counseling. God instilled the institution of marriage in us as humans, not to have it fail, but to have it flourish. Intentional marriage education is a presupposition said to better prepare couples for this God instilled relationship, helping them to build a stronger marriage. Premarital counseling is an effective first step to this binding contract, teaching the couples communication skills, and strengthening the relationship before the tie of marriage takes place.

The world is a scary place. With divorce rates being roughly 50%, our society is showing less of an ability to maintain a healthy commitment in marriage, and signifying that some aspect of marriages needs help. Intentional pre-marriage preparation has proved to be beneficial, helping with communication, problem solving skills, and even just preparing the couple for what is to come. According to an anonymous author of the journal Christianity Today, “In the face of

these divorce statistics, we must recognize that divorce itself is not our main problem. Rather we face the broad weakening of the idea of marital permanence in our society” (Christianity Today 36). Premarital counseling is the step needed to drive the concept of marital permanence into couples’ heads.

From premarital counseling, the couple can learn whether or not the relationship will work and last into the future. Take for example an engaged couple who has never discussed the want or need for children. In her mind, the woman wants children, but knows nothing about her fiancé's dislike of children. An issue like this can lead to a broken relationship, but what better time for this conflict to come out than before the permanent binding of marriage occurs? Premarital counseling does just that. Whether the couple takes a simple premarital test to show where each person is at in the relationship, or they actually go to a counselor or member of a parish, issues such as these can be addressed and discussed before marriage. Either they can be worked out, and the couple, in turn, learns conflict management, or they cannot be worked out, and the couple sees that marriage is not right for them. Regardless of the outcome, premarital counseling is a source for the strengthening of relationships, teaching couples communication skills and helping them address and get through conflict.

There have been many studies done to research and to better understand pre-marriage counseling. One particular study done by Jason S. Carroll and William J. Doherty has proved that premarital counseling exhibits a positive correlation with the respect to the success of the marriage itself. These two men of the University of Minnesota and Brigham Young University performed 13 experimental studies to test the relevance of counseling (Carroll and Doherty). Of these thirteen studies where randomly assigned experiment and control groups were used, only

one study failed to improve on the couple's communication skills. Overall, they found that premarital counseling is generally effective in helping the communication process, problem solving skills, and overall relationship stability. They were able to find that this appears to hold effect for at least six months and up to three years. Even further than that, they concluded that even though the effectiveness of each form of premarital counseling is unknown, some training in conflict management is absolutely necessary (Carroll and Doherty). Couples need to be aware of how to solve problems effectively, and be able to communicate their concerns positively. Anger portrayed in a negative or hurtful way only leads to stress in the relationship. It can ultimately, if let go long enough, lead to divorce, thus stabilizing the divorce rate or even increasing the statistics.

In conclusion of the Carroll and Doherty study, they stated that with this research, came positive findings. The best studies of these programs show consistent results, and all point to a positive correlation between premarital counseling and the success and strength of the marriage itself. These studies consistently point to "the same basic processes and skills (e.g., communication, conflict negotiation, commitment, etc.) that are key factors in marital success and stability" (Carroll and Doherty). From this study, it is made evident that premarital counseling is very much effective to the overall marriage and lowers the risk of divorce for couples who complete the process.

Another study done by a larger group of individuals came to show similar results. This particular one was done by Scott M. Stanley, Paul R. Amato, Christine A. Johnson, and Howard J. Markman. For their research, they sampled couples as a part of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative Statewide Baseline Survey. Overall, from surveying this sample, researchers found

that premarital education is negatively associated with divorce. In other words, premarital education “was associated with a decline of 31% in the annual odds of divorce” (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, Markman). That is a significant drop, further proving the sheer importance of premarital counseling for relationships. Couples learn about how to keep a relationship stable regardless of the mountains they must climb throughout. If they know how to deal with troubles and how to communicate to one another throughout these trials, they seem to be less likely to continuously live in disharmony, and less likely to jump into a divorce. All in all, this study directly correlated to the Carroll and Doherty study, proving the same point and showing the same results.

All of this information easily proves that premarital counseling is beneficial to the overall health and stability of the marriage, but there are still some gaps in the research. One study done by Busby, Ivey, Harris, and Ates helped to fill that gap. After the studies done by Stanley’s group and Carroll’s group, it was determined that premarital counseling does have quite an impact, but it was still unknown what types of programs would be beneficial to the couple. This particular study done by Busby and his research group helped to paint a clearer picture of the answer to this unknown question.

This group of researchers acknowledged that there are three widely used methods, self-directed, therapist-directed, and assessment-based methods for couples before marriage. Briefly, the self-directed method is a program where the couples are given a premarital workbook and are instructed to work through it in a 6-8 week period. The therapist-directed method is a program directed by a therapist with professional training in marital therapy, counseling, social work, or psychology. Couples are required to meet with the therapist for six 1-hour sessions to discuss

their relationship and potential marriage. The assessment-based method is an extensive couple inventory with a facilitator focusing on topics such as empathy, conflict, strengths, values, attempting to enhance marital growth and stability (Busby, Ivey, Harris, Ates). Overall, they found that the assessment-based treatment couples had significantly better scores than the other two types in satisfaction and communication. At the six month follow up, the assessment-based participants had better scores on the problem areas scale than the workbook-only condition, but the workbook-only condition resulted in better scores than the therapist-directed condition. Overall, all three indicated a better knowledge of communication and a more stable relationship within their marriage.

Various studies have been used to reach the same conclusion on the benefits of intentional pre-marriage education. Regardless if the couple is set on marriage, or if the couple is simply trying to find out if they are compatible for marriage, this process helps. Not only does it improve communication like most of the studies have clearly indicated, it helps to address issues that can be potentially detrimental to the overall health and stability of the marriage. For example, whether or not the couple desires children, where they want to reside once married, where they are at emotionally with one another, and many other pertinent topics would be brought up in counseling, showing the couple that marriage is much more than just a simple “I love you, you love me, let’s get married”. Marriage is a permanent covenant under God, and again, as the article from Christianity Today stated, our society is picking up on a serious lack of the idea of marriage permanence. Most programs of premarital counseling, however, stress this idea and in turn, show couples that it is not acceptable to jump into divorce with the simplest of

problems, or even jump into marriage without evaluating every aspect of their relationship beforehand.

Coming back to the quote from Olson and DeFrain, we see again the short, underlying thought on preparation. “Failing to prepare is like preparing to fail” (477) is a quote taken from Olson and DeFrain’s textbook, and it easily portrays the necessity of preparation for any event or practice, but more specifically, the institution of marriage. Being prepared for this lifelong commitment is the utmost important step in beginning a marriage, and premarital counseling attempts to do just that. Programs such as assessment-based or therapist-based counseling are effective ways in helping couples come to the realization of marital permanence, while teaching couples lifelong skills necessary for keeping a stable relationship. It even shows a correlation with the decline in the divorce rate. The happiness and strength of a marriage is presupposed by the effectiveness of this counseling. This God-instilled idea of marriage deserves to flourish, and every step possible to prepare for this blessing should be taken. Premarital counseling does prove to be effective to marriages immediately as well as in the long run, stabilizing ties of communication and teaching pertinent concepts to the premarital couple.

Citations:

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