

Working with Premarital Couples in the Hope Focused Couples Approach

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[Hope Focused Couples Project](#)

Literature review

Although the basis of this article is focusing on engaged couples, these techniques apply to many couples that are not married, including those that cohabitate or those that are abstinent. These couples are often served by religious organizations, which serve as a main promoter and provider of pre-marriage education (Halford et al., 2006). Couples who receive premarital counseling “have a significantly greater likelihood of maintaining a high level of relationship adjustment compared with similar couples” not provided with such programs (Baucom, Hahlweg, Atkins, Engl, & Thurmaier, 2006, p. 448). Stanley, Amato, Johnson, and Markman (2006) found that premarital education was associated with higher levels of satisfaction and commitment to marriage and lower levels of conflict, as well as a decline of 31% in the annual odds of divorce. The study by Stanley et al. demonstrated that “participation in premarital education is associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction, lower levels of destructive conflict, and higher levels of interpersonal commitment to spouses” (2006, p. 122). Their conclusion was that “premarital education was positively and significantly associated with marital satisfaction and commitment and negatively and significantly associated with divorce and marital conflict” (Stanley et al., p. 120). The effects in their study were consistent across race, income, and education levels, suggesting that premarital education is generally beneficial for a wide range of couples.

A time of change. Bruhn and Hill (2004) suggest that premarital counseling focus on dynamic and changeable factors, such as conflict management, dysfunctional attitudes and expectations, friendship, and commitment beliefs, rather than factors that are static and less likely to change. In their study, engaged couples rated spending time with and learning about their future spouse as the most helpful components of premarital counseling. The most valuable topics to include for discussion were communication, commitment, conflict resolution, children, and church. Other topics found to be helpful were financial management, sexuality, parenting expectations, and partner’s families of origin. Several premarital therapy programs that include discussions of topics like these have been developed for use in faith-based and secular practice (PREPARE, PREP, etc.)

Assessing commitment. In working with a premarital couple, it is important to first assess for commitment. Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006), for example, discuss the phenomenon of “sliding versus deciding” in marriage. Their research indicates that many couples who begin by cohabitating end up married due to the inertia of the relationship. After living together for a period of time, the “sliding” individuals ask themselves why they aren’t married and why they are continuing this way; these questions are often coming from family members or their partner as well. While this individual may not have chosen to marry the partner

originally, he/she feels stuck in the inertia of the relationship. Rather than making a conscious decision to marry, this individual has a “Why not?” approach to marriage. These individuals have a greater likelihood of divorce and dissatisfaction with their relationship.

On the other hand, those who begin cohabitating after they become engaged are typically those who decide to marry. These individuals have made a conscious decision to commit to a partner, and tend to have better outcomes. It is important for the therapist to be aware of the client’s level of commitment to the partner. This can frequently be assessed by the story of their relationship. The “sliders” will be characterized by having a long-term relationship and then finally deciding to marry for seemingly no reason. When asked about their motivation for marriage, most of these individuals will say that they moved in due to circumstances changing (such as housing problems) rather than relationship change. They frequently report deciding that they should “go ahead and get married,” while the deciders will frequently have an event in their relationship that leads to increased commitment. For those who are lacking in commitment, focusing on committing to one another can be an important intervention in therapy. The HFA vision exercise is likely to be very important; the therapist should stress that this exercise is a commitment to work toward these goals together for the next ten years of their relationship and ensure that they are willing to make that commitment.

Issues of Sexuality

Another key area of concern for those doing couples’ work with unmarried individuals is sexuality. Since the HFA is based on Christian principles, it will likely be used by practitioners of a religious background, as well as attract religious couples. There are two aspects of this problem: the religious practitioner dealing with sexually active, unmarried couples and the practitioner dealing with premarital abstaining couples. For the practitioner, it is important to assess one’s own comfort in talking about sexuality with a couple who is not married before entering the therapy room. Sexuality is an important aspect of relationship satisfaction and may, in some cases, be the aspect of the couple’s relationship that is preventing them from making a commitment; therefore, it should be considered carefully. With abstinent couples, it is important to help them bridge the divide between abstinence and a healthy couple sexuality in marriage. Often those who are abstinent are not only abstaining from intercourse, but may have discomfort discussing issues of sexuality.

The HOPE approach generally includes CLEAVE, of which one aspect is specifically enjoying sexuality together. The abstinent couple should not be encouraged to have sex; however, encouraging them to talk about sex can be a powerful intervention. There are a few things to keep in mind when assigning this homework. The couple should ensure that they have this discussion in a place that is public enough that this discussion will not lead to them violating their beliefs about sex before marriage, but private enough that they need not fear being overheard. Some suggested places include a secluded table at a restaurant, a picnic in the park, etc. In addition, many couples feel discomfort talking about this issue with their partners; they should be encouraged to monitor their arousal and take breaks as needed. They should be assured that this exercise is a preparation for their marriage and not intended to change their relationship at this time. The therapist should also encourage the couple to consider that the wedding night is likely not the best place to be having their first conversation about sexuality together, as this will increase pressure and nervousness for many couples. Abstinent couples often appreciate having some questions to guide their discussion. These questions might include:

- What messages have you learned about sexuality from your family and your church?
- What are your expectations about your sexual life together?
- How often do you feel that urge to be touched or receive sexual release? What stimulates these urges? How do you handle them?
- What is the best physical contact? What is a turnoff?
- What does your spouse need to know about you sexually?
- What physical involvement have you had so far? Is this consistent with your values?

For those highly religious couples, it might be helpful to have them read passages related to sexuality in marriage, such as I Corinthians 7:3-5 and Songs of Solomon, to discuss the Bible's attitude toward sexuality. This might be a good "warm-up" to discussing their thoughts and expectations about sexuality. For couples that struggle with this conversation, it may be helpful to refer them to a religious leader to discuss their faith's perspective of marital sexuality.

In addition to changes in CLEAVE, other changes to the standard HOPE approach may be helpful. Premarital couples are likely to be fairly early in their relationship. They may have difficulty coming up with applications for apologies and forgiveness in their relationship so far; thus, the therapist may need to take a more psychoeducational approach in this area. For example, the therapist can talk about how hurts are inevitable in marriage and teach the couple how to handle hurts that will happen in their marriage. The therapist can also give the couple suggestions of things that many couples struggle with for subject matter for listening exercises, problem-solving techniques, and apologies and forgiveness interventions. These topics could include money, sex, in-law relationships, household responsibilities, future parenting, etc. The couple can also discuss concerns about any of these topics as homework assignments.

Therapist considerations

Therapists should be sensitive to the fact that the HFA is mostly intended for married couples and look for ways to make the material more applicable to premarital couples. This could include simple changes, such as using different language in the interventions ("partner" or "fiancé/fiancée" instead of "spouse" or "husband/wife"). The goal of therapy should be more skills building by bringing up issues and discussing them as a couple. Therapy could also focus more on areas of discussion if there are few areas of conflict. The therapist should identify important topics for engaged couples and find places to incorporate them in Hope interventions. This will open the door for the couple to begin having conversations about important topics for their future together.

Therapists can also assign bibliotherapy to enhance the couples' counseling experience and give them more time for discussions at home. There are many excellent resources, both faith-based and secular, for engaged couples; some helpful resources are included below in the annotated bibliography. Many books also have companion workbooks or discussion guides that can also facilitate helpful conversations between partners about a wide variety of issues. In addition, the therapist can encourage the couple not to see their Hope experience as the end to their counseling; instead, the couple should be encouraged to take advantage of other forms of therapy in their church or community. Couple groups at church, marriage mentoring programs, and Bible studies can help the couple continue to prepare for marriage. Finally, all therapists

doing premarital counseling in the HFA are encouraged to schedule a follow-up session a few months into the marriage. This session would ensure that the couple has a way to get help without stigma early in the relationship to help them with difficulties that are expected early in married life. Bruhn & Hill (2004) even say that one of the potential benefits of premarital counseling is giving couples sources for help if they experience difficulties later in their marriage.

Annotated Bibliography

Parrott, L. & Parrott, L. (1995). *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House.

This is an excellent book for premarital couples to read as bibliotherapy. The book addresses seven questions to ask before you marry, including such topics as marriage myths, love styles, personal happiness, communication styles, gender differences, conflict resolution, and spiritual intimacy. Couples will also find the questions at the end of each chapter, companion workbooks, and exercises helpful as they communicate their expectations for marriage with their future spouse.

Penner, C. & Penner, J. (2004). *Sex 101: Getting your sex life off to a great start*. W. Publishing Group: Nashville, TN.

This book is meant as a guide for premarital couples to help them transition to a healthy marital sexuality. For those that have difficulty in this area, this book can be helpful. It is important that the couple understand that the book lays out the facts about sexuality as well as asking them to consider their moral and ethical beliefs about it. This does have a Christian perspective, but does include hand-drawn illustrations to help them understand anatomical issues.

PREPARE/ENRICH by Life Innovations < <http://www.prepare-enrich.com> >

PREPARE/ENRICH is one of the only empirically validated approaches for premarital preparation and marital enrichment. The program uses a comprehensive couple assessment combined with feedback and skill-building exercises.

PREP, Inc. < <http://www.prepinc.com> >

Developed by Drs. Markman and Stanley, PREP and the religiously-oriented Christian PREP are “education programs to teach couples the skills and principles they need to maintain a healthy and lasting relationship.”

Smart Marriages: The Coalition for Marriage, Family, and Couples Education

< <http://smartmarriages.org/index.html> >

The Smart Marriage's organization has many resources for mental health professionals, clergy, and lay leaders who work with couples and families.

Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Sliding versus deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect. *Family Relations*, 55, 499-509.

This article addresses the issue of commitment in premarital couples. This differentiation is based on empirical data indicating that it is not just that those who marry as opposed to cohabitation are selecting themselves as more stable individuals, those who are more religious, etc. The cohabitation effect is greater than that predicted by self-selection. This article delineates empirical support for a model that details the factors that go into the level of commitment of a premarital couple, specifically the importance of the male deciding that marriage is his goal rather than sliding into marriage due to outside pressures holding the relationship together. The authors theorize that the very state of cohabitation is much less defined than marriage, often "just happens" when people find that they are staying with their significant other much of the time, and often occurs without consideration of the consequences, which set up couples for lower commitment.

Wright, H.N. (2005). *Now That You're Engaged*. Ventura, California: Regal Books.

H. Norman Wright takes readers through thirteen "commitments" couples make to each other when they make a commitment to marriage. This book will help engaged couples learn how to make wise decisions together, understand each other, listen and communicate more effectively, resolve conflicts, forgive each other, prepare for common problems, and pray together.

References

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Bruhn, D.M. & Hill, R. (2004). Designing a premarital counseling program. *The Family Journal*, 12(4), 389-391.

Halford, W.K., O'Donnell, C., Lizzio, A., & Wilson, K.L. (2006). Do couples at high risk of relationship problems attend premarriage education? *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20(1), 160-163.

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