

Before saying 'I do,' make couples counseling a to-do

By Louis R. Carlozo
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It's almost wedding time, and you've attacked that list of to-dos with true go-getter gumption. Centerpieces? Check. Photographer? Check. Caterer? Check.

But one matter calls for serious consideration: premarital counseling.

Premarital huh?

"People take up to 12 months to plan a wedding, obsessing over flowers and a dress they'll wear for 6 to 12 hours," says Cherilynn Veland, a licensed clinical social worker who runs Lincoln Park Counseling. "But you have to spend that kind of time and energy looking into your premarital counseling."

Many religious institutions offer the service, often supervised by the person performing the wedding. But scores of couples — whether marrying outside a religious setting or looking for independent guidance — need help that's either more clinical or more informal.

Independent counseling and premarriage coaching exists, and it's plentiful. But you have to pursue it with gusto.

"It's a tough job," says Veland, who customizes her approach based on the unique issues her couples face. "Couples need someone who's good at assessing their strengths and helping them shore those up. And you need to make sure that whoever you're meeting with, you have a trusted connection and similar goals."

A typical round of premarriage counseling might consist of a half-dozen sessions, and it's not uncommon for future husbands and wives to vent.

Veland and others say tiffs over table cards or invitation letterhead often point to deeper issues of trust and mutual respect.

"The first thing I do is provide an assessment," Veland says.

"I'm trying to see why they came here. Are there communication difficulties? Who are their relationship role models? Were they healthy or unhealthy?"

To find a counselor that's right, Veland suggests, "Talk to people who are both newly married and have done the research, and people who have been married 30 or 40 years and have a great therapist in their support system."

"Educating yourself before walking into something as important, but also as challenging, as marriage simply makes sense."

Mitch Temple, author of 'The First Five Years of Marriage'

One couple married for 32 years has turned their passion for successful marriage into a business. Jim and Sheri Mueller run Growthtrac Ministries out of their home in northwest suburban Algonquin.

"We meet weekly, the location is negotiable," Jim Mueller says. "We've mentored in homes, church offices, but we're actually mentoring one couple at a Caribou Coffee."

Growthtrac uses Prepare-Enrich, an assessment tool that measures 12 areas of compatibility, including communication, conflict resolution and spiritual beliefs. "We find that it's very, very accurate and gives us a running start when dealing with couples," Mueller says.

The Muellers charge \$499 to conduct a round of 3-4 90-minute sessions; social workers and psychologists charge anywhere from \$75-\$175 for a

45-minute session — with the possibility of your health insurance picking up a chunk of the bill.

Sometimes, the sessions yield truths that reduce the matter of chicken or fish for the wedding-day entrees to a mere triviality.

"There have been some cases where couples have decided not to get married," he says. "You might think of that as a bad thing, but we think of it as a win. Often times, it's a big disconnect in the communication area, where they'll argue in front of us in the room. And we'll say, 'Look, it's not that you can't get married — but we don't think you're ready.' We might recommend six sessions of counseling with some referrals, and then reengage with us later."

With in-depth counseling, couples facing serious issues can be effectively served by clinical members of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists (AAMFT). "Educating yourself before walking into something as important, but also as challenging, as marriage simply makes sense," says Mitch Temple, author of "The First Five Years of Marriage" (Tyndale) and an AAMFT member.

Veland concurs. She renewed her vows with her husband less than two years ago to mark their 10-year anniversary. The ceremony threw her back to 1997 and her own premarital prep.

You may reach Growthtrac Ministries at 877-458-6266 growthtrac.com

Preparing couples for life beyond the honeymoon phase

How important is premarital counseling? While no program can guarantee the long-term success of a marriage, some therapists think it so important they've taken to calling it "premarital education."

Scott M. Stanley, a University of Denver psychology professor, reports in the journal *Family Relations* that 9 out of 10 couples who took premarital counseling considered it worthwhile — and were less likely to consider divorce within the first five years of marriage.

"The most important thing is to do some kind of preparation," says Jim Mueller of Growthtrac Ministries. "Once you come back from the honeymoon, you're back into the daily cycle of job, come home and go to sleep; job, come home and go to sleep. And you may ask, 'Who is this guy?'"

It's about marriage happiness, and you have to learn how to self-feed and build support systems."

In mentoring and counseling, couples learn to find and build on supports — whether from therapists or happy couples who've logged decades of successful marriage. They also pinpoint communication strategies for taking on tricky matters, from empathetic listening to expressing sexual desires.

That works pays off, at least by some measures. For example, four out of five conflicted couples — those at highest risk — moved to a more positive couple type after completing and studying their Prepare-Enrich assessments, according to statistics compiled by Minneapolis-based researchers Luke Knutson and David Olson on behalf of Life Innovations that produces Prepare-Enrich.
— *L.C.*



Married 32 years, Jim and Sheri Mueller of Algonquin offer premarital mentoring to couples regardless of religious affiliation.
CANDICE C. CUSIC/TRIBUNE

Readers please note:

- The Tribune misquoted our mentoring fees. The fees are corrected, and stated above.
- Also, please note that Growthtrac Ministries is a Christian, non-profit organization

Jim Mueller, Growthtrac Ministries