

PREMARITAL COUNSELING

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Let's face it – Tying the marital knot seems to be an increasingly risky business to many a Gen. X couple. With distraught marriages on the rise and divorce rates zooming up, marriage counselors are noting a Western trend that is fast catching up in India – the advent of premarital counseling. This trend has much to do with changing social scenario in which couples that are romantically involved, explore various options open to them before they can commit themselves to marriage. Youth today seem to no longer rush into solemnizing their bond with marriage vows at the earliest opportunity. They would like to systematically and meticulously weigh the pros and cons, the pluses vs. minuses, almost like they would evaluate products before making a major purchase! And why not, one may ask. After all it is perhaps one of the most crucial decisions in one's life. With professional help from a marriage counselor this process can be made easier, and couples who are engaged to be married can do so with their eyes open.

This process of exploration in premarital counseling prepares the ground for laying a strong foundation for the marital bond to ensue. It provides an exciting opportunity to learn about each other and about oneself, so that they are not completely taken by surprise when they run into rough weather after marriage. It provides the necessary impetus to pave the way for stable, successful and happy marriage.

You might wonder why so much fuss over something those generations before us have so effortlessly managed. It is not as if marriages earlier did not face crises that couples learnt to tide over. It is because in the present Age of Anxiety and Stress, relationships have become fragile like never before. Couples today are caught in a web of their own making – multiple roles, multi tasking, and multitudinous aspirations, all juggling for space in their overworked minds, lowering patience and tolerance levels.

Most people do not realize that a dating relationship is very different from a marital relationship. While dating, we tend to put our best foot forward and try to do everything to impress our potential mates. We do our utmost to cover up our flaws, embarrassing habits and troublesome temperaments. We enter marriage with many 'private' assumptions about life after marriage. In many couples these assumptions remain private and rarely get discussed prior to marriage when there is plenty of time to negotiate to clarify, to understand better. They thus enter marriage without a road map of the diversions, detours, bumps and ditches they're likely to encounter.

So if pre marital counseling can help couples evolve and develop an emotionally intelligent marriage, what does it actually involve?

Premarital counseling is essentially about identifying their assumptions and also about how to deal with conflict. The initial objective is to assist the couple to communicate honestly and deeply to identify challenges in their relationship. The next step would be to help them develop skills to recognize strengths and weakness of each partner and what each brings into the relationships. Lastly, it is to enable the couple plan for growing together without losing their individual identities. This means not only spelling out what is common to both but also acceptance and appreciation of their differences.

Premarital counseling can be done with either couples alone or even couple groups. It would either involve weekly sessions for a fixed length of time, like an hour with the counselor, or be in the form of a more lengthy weakened retreat for couple groups. The counseling could also include some kind of assessment procedures through questionnaires of personality, compatibility, expectations etc. This kind of process would require time, commitment and a willingness to invest both financially and emotionally.

Let us examine some of the key issues and conflict areas that crop up in a marriage which could have been easily dealt with and resolved by premarital counseling –

- **Adjustment Fears –**

Couples contemplating inter-religious or inter community marriages go through a phase of conflict and anxiety about how they would adjust to each other's religious, social or caste backgrounds. This issue is of greater significance for the girl who has to adjust to her husband's home and family and adapt to their customs, values, rituals and code of conduct. Premarital counseling would help to address many potential stress or pressure points that the couple could face after marriage and work out positive strategies to cope with them. Being pre-warned is pre-armed and reduces much heartburn later on.

- **Commitment Fears –**

Akshay and Nita have been dating for eight long years, yet hesitant to take that final plunge into matrimony because they are still not absolutely 'certain' about each other. Just because they have many differences of opinions and view points they are afraid that they will end up arguing and fighting all the time. Yet, if only they attend a few sessions of premarital counseling they will learn the art of conflict resolution better to make their relationship more meaningful and permanent.

- **Loss of Independence –**

Still other dating couples are afraid to marry lest they have to give up their individual lifestyles they are so comfortable with. It is a fear of not only sharing physical spaces with another person (even someone you are in love with), but also sharing a life together. Some may have apprehensions about taking the responsibilities that goes with marriage – of making it work. All these fears can be explored and dealt with in premarital counseling by fine tuning expectations of and from each other, and learning to develop a positive balanced outlook.

- **Clash of Interests and Priorities –**

Simrita and Rajat are a young upwardly mobile couple totally in love with each, going steady for three years. They are to wed very soon, but have been having a strained relationship since the last two months. This is to do with a new job offer that Simrita has got which involves a lot of traveling. Rajat insists that she decline it in the interests of their own marriage, which she feels is a unfair demand. She feels that it need not affect the quality of their marital life as she would be able to devote adequate time for home and her job, while Rajat vehemently opposes the idea.

Such a clash of priorities and individual inclinations need to be negotiated in the premarital stage through counseling, to chalk out how each partner's needs and interests can be respected and fostered through mutual agreement – a healthy give and take, so that these irritants are firmly handled even before the marital life begins.

- **Home and Finance Issues –**

Since many of the post marital conflicts center around domestic roles, responsibilities and money matters, it makes sense to see that are handled at the earliest – during the engagement or dating phase itself. Every couple about to be wed would benefit from listing out their expectations from their partner regarding his or her contribution to the home and the finances and evaluate how realistic they are. They could compare notes with each other to identify mismatches so that they can alter expectations realistically. They need to resolve differences about handling of marital roles and managing financial dealings openly and honestly, as this would pave way for a smooth marital functioning later on.

- **Sexual Issues –**

Though not the norm, many young couples to be married seem to feel a growing need to discuss matters pertaining to sexual practice and performance. Sex is no longer something that just happens to you after marriage. Partners want to be aware about how to get pleasure and please each other sexually, so

that they do not appear naïve or ignorant on their wedding night. In many instances they also seek to allay many doubts and fears over their impending first sexual act, which have always been shrouded in myths and misconceptions. Also, hidden sexual preferences many come into the open that can actually avert a potentially disastrous marriage, like homosexual tendencies. All this would be possible if sexual doubts and apprehensions are discussed openly in premarital counseling sessions, so that timely intervention can ensure that their sexual relationship can be truly stimulating and satisfying after marriage.

- **Self Disclosure Issues –**

How much of yourself and your past do you really want to reveal to your partner or spouse to be? A difficult question to answer! It is best to play by the ear and do so as the situation warrants. Many a great relationship is blown apart by an overwhelming need to pry into the past affairs of the partner, only to discover that he or she cannot handle the information uncovered. This can however be easily done under the skillful guidance of a trained counselor – whether that information is pertaining to romantic tangles, history or personal illness, family dysfunctions, financial disasters, failed careers or anything else.

The above are a few of the commonly encountered areas that can make or mar the happiness and success of a marriage.

It is all about making sense out of a mosaic of patterns so that a harmonious and cogent picture emerges, out of the many individual differences and perceptions that constitute it.

Just like we would like to have health insurance, all couples would do well to accept the importance of *marital insurance* in the form of premarital counseling so that it can enhance the quality of their marital life together. Ultimately it is walking the path with eyes open to what realistically lays ahead for them without dampening the glow of love radiating from within.