

Essentials for Marriage Preparation

Unfortunately, too many couples getting married spend more time preparing for the wedding day than the marriage itself, thus, increasing the possibility of marital discord and breakup. Research tells us that marriage preparation is the one sure way of reducing marital dissolution. Marriage preparation may not prevent problems in marriage, but it can equip couples with the tools needed to handle disappointments in marriage and maintain a spicy marriage. The marriage that breaks up in the few months or perhaps even after 20 or 30 years usually comes to an end because problems were not solved at the beginning.

What is Pre-Marriage Education?

It is imperative that we view marriage preparation encompassing a long process of learning involving parents, family, society, church, and formal training. Many do not fully understand the meaning and importance of preparation for marriage. First of all, many often refer to it as pre-marriage counseling. However, preparation for marriage is better described as an educational process at best, rather than a counseling or therapeutic process. Thus we have the term Pre-Marriage Education, meaning that a couple is taken systematically through a process of instruction on various subjects and themes of life. Like in the classroom, they are to make personal applications, and where necessary, adjustments.

Although pre-marriage preparation is an educational process, yet there are times when individual or couple therapy is necessary. Many take damaging emotional baggage in the relationship, stifling growth and happiness. Some have been so broken and battered as children that it is almost inevitable to avoid a high level of marital stress without going through the process of pre-marriage education and counseling. Above all, it is imperative that we view marriage preparation as a life-changing educational process for all who are getting married.

A Good Marriage Does Not Happen by Default

No one is inherently blessed with all the knowledge and wisdom needed for healthy marital functioning or satisfaction. It does not matter how intelligent you are or how well your parents educated you on the issues of life, although that's important. It even does not matter if you are a well disciplined, independent thinking, mature adult; although this is a paramount prerequisite for a happy marriage. Pre-Marriage Education is a must for everyone. Why is it so? Because marriage is a university, from which one cannot really graduate. The information and tools necessary to make a marriage work can only be garnered from those who are on the marriage pathway and from those who have made it their purpose to study the intricacies of life, social development, and the dynamics of relationships. A specialist in pre-marriage preparation, Robyn Parker defines it this way: "In general, pre-marriage programs seek to engage couples in the processes of reflection and skills training with the aim of promoting and supporting the development of strong and stable relationships."

Isn't it amazing how serious we are about going to school from the age of five or seven and up to age twenty or thirty to obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for a particular career? However, we are not as serious about a life decision, marriage, that has the greatest potential of emotionally or physically destroying us. Every couple getting married, no matter the age or how many times they were married before, should receive pre-marriage education. Those individuals who are divorced and getting marriage again are even at greater risk of marital troubles without pre-marriage education. Remember, marriage is a university from which we can never graduate. Divorce is not graduation. It is school drop out.

The Stages of Pre-Marriage Preparation

To understand the full scope of preparation for marriage, it will be important to view it in two stages. The first is the **informal** stage of pre-marriage preparation. The second is its **formal** stage. Both stages are interrelated and are important as the other. Let us define and explain each stage.

Informal Stage: This is the time when children best learn from the modeling of parental attitudes and behaviors and from their own experimentation. This is the stage when far too many parents are not aware how much they are influencing the future adult life and marriage of their tender offsprings. The informal stage can further be divided in two phases:

1) The parental modeling stage (from birth to pre-teens) or the formation years. This is the time when parents have the greatest impact on the lives of their children. From birth children will experience warmth, love, and caring which will help them develop trust, inner peace, and self-respect--an important prerequisite for a healthy marriage. On the other hand, if they experience little or no love, unnecessary pain, shame, and disappointment, then it is more than likely that they will develop a lack of trust in people and have strong feelings of being unloved. These individuals would seek to get married for the wrong reason: To fulfill what's missing in their lives. That's dangerous.

2) The personal exploration stage (teens to young adulthood) or the experimental years. This is the time when children move away from dependence on parents to independence. During this phase experimentation is the name of the game. This is the time when the teens will choose to or not to put into practice principles of life modeled by their parents. Some will fall in and out of love and respond to those experiences depending on their early childhood development. These years are most crucial to pre-marriage preparation. It is the time when sex, drug, and alcohol, and other social behaviors will test the will power and inner strength of developing minds. If they respond negatively to these outside forces, the chances of having a healthy marriage will be thwarted.

The Formal Stage: This is the time when structured, formal training and education of life's issues and marriage itself take place. I call this the application years (adulthood). It is also when all the parental influences, early childhood training, teenage experimentation and experiences will blend together as adults make lifelong applications. Through formal education, what I call Pre-Marriage Education, couples are assisted by a trained and knowledgeable professionals to understand and apply their life's experience thus far to a new dynamic relationship--marriage. They are further equipped with skills and tools to better assist them in the other areas of their lives.

How Should Pre-Marriage Education Programs Work?

Pre-marriage education programs can be in two formats: 1) The couple or personal format where the couple sees a trained pastor, marriage therapist, or specialist in pre-marriage education. 2) The group format is where the couple may attend a weekend seminar or a short series for pre-married couples. I believe that although both are not required, it is a positive approach to participate in both formats of pre-marriage education. However, the format that is most important is the couple or personal format because it provides intense personal dialogue and freedom not available in a group setting.

Do Not Rush

Ideally, a couple should begin a formal pre-marriage education program one year before the date for marriage. If that's not possible, a couple needs at least six months before the wedding date to begin a pre-marriage education program. A comprehensive, well-planned, pre-marriage education program takes at least eight to ten sessions, although it can be much longer. If pre-marriage education starts one year before the marriage, sessions can be spread over a period of six to eight months, allowing time for adjustments, practice, personal application and growth.

Good pre-marriage education cannot be packed in a one-week or one-day period. Time is needed for the couples to contemplate on what is being taught. It will be unwise for any pastor, counselor or psychologist to rush a couple through the process of pre-marriage education just so they can fulfill the wedding day appointment.

Who Should Conduct the Education?

To whom should a couple go to for pre-marriage education. First of all, a Christian couple must keep their pastor up to date about the development of their relationship. Even if they feel he/she is not qualified to provide pre-marriage counseling, he/she is their pastor, and is the main coordinator of the wedding ceremony. The pastor who will not be providing the pre-marriage education should have at least three planning sessions with the couple.

It is best that a couple seek someone who is trained and experienced in pre-marriage education. Not all pastors have the training and skills that are necessary to prepare couples for marriage. Find out your pastor's credentials. Talk to other couples whom the pastor may have counseled and also talk to your pastor about it. It is great if there is a pastor who has significant skills and experience in successfully preparing couples for marriage because marriage is sacred and holy.

There are also professional, full-time specialists in pre-marriage education. These persons have studied the dynamics of relationships and know best how to train couples and help them through the growing crisis of marriage preparation and marriage itself. Couples should look for a counselor or psychologist who is trained in marriage and family and pre-marriage education. There are also individuals who have attended certificate courses and have become experts in training couples for marriage, although they may not have a degree. These are the ones you will want to prepare you for marriage.

What to talk about?

What do couples talk about when preparing for marriage? Pre-marriage education programs will deal with at least sixteen subjects. They are: 1) God's plan for marriage. 2) Religious values. 3) Roles in marriage. 4) Sexuality. 5) Finances. 6) In-laws. 7) Health and family planning 8) Values and goals. 9) Communication. 10) Creative problem solving. 11) Love and feelings. 12) Issues of power and control. 13) Starting a home. 14) The wedding. 15) The honeymoon. 16) After the wedding.

Good pre-marriage education encourages the couple to think objectively and wisely about getting married. It also empowers them to cancel getting married if they discover that it will be unwise. Couples need to be honest and open with each other. The pain resulting from canceling a wedding ceremony cannot be compared to the pain experienced in a troubled marriage or an unexpected divorce. Dear reader, if you are getting married within the next twelve months, I encourage you to seek pre-marriage

education now. Do not delay. Your life depends on it.

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