

PRE-MARITAL COUNSELLING: FUNCTION OF SUSTAINING MARITAL LIFE

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Abstract

This paper highlights the importance of pre-marital counselling for successful marriage by presenting a real life case. Pre-marital counselling is a form of training imparted to the aspirants of marital life to enable them to have a sound and steady married life. Individuals who go through the process of pre-marital counselling are expected to acquire the coping capacity in facing difficult situations in their marriage. The case presented in the paper is that of Jane, whose parents had a relationship of marital conflict from the beginning. On account of her exposure to such parental issues and fights from her childhood, she experienced anxieties and fears of marriage, when the marriage proposal was placed before her. She went for pre-marital counselling which helped her free herself from her misconceptions and anxieties about marriage. When she was contacted in the follow-up exercise, she acknowledged that pre-marital counselling did have a positive role in her successful married life.

Introduction

Marriages are considered as a blessing if it is successful or else it becomes a curse. Getting married is easy, but staying married is very difficult. In our society marriage is a respected, or even sacred, social institution.

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Hence there is need for adequate preparation for assuming marital roles. Pre-marital counselling is one such process preparatory to marriage. It is a valuable service rendered for dealing with the realities of marriage which often get camouflaged under the initial honeymoon spirit. Pre-marital counselling has the objective of enabling the couple to stay in marriage beyond this initial stage. This paper presents the case of a young lady who was helped through pre-marital counselling to enter into a successful marital life.

Pre-Marital Counselling

Pre-marital counselling as an important part of preparation for marriage is now getting increasingly accepted. It is seen as a pre-requisite for successful marital bond. Pre-marital counselling is a form of training imparted to the aspirants of marital life to enable them to have a sound and steady married life. Individuals who go through the process of pre-marital counselling are expected to acquire the coping capacity in facing difficult situations in their marriage. While calculations based on horoscopes and stars speculate on the prospects of successful married life between two individuals, pre-marital counselling provides the individuals with the knowledge about the realities of marital life and imparts the skills to understand the differences of each other on account of personal characteristics and family backgrounds, and thereby to bridge the gap between the couple. Today the institution of marriage is variously affected by the changes in the family system, status of women, education, employment etc. In such a socio-economic context pre-marital counselling can help the married couple sustain in marital life and preserve their marriage. Through pre-marital counselling the young woman and man acquire the knowledge, skills and guidance for assuming the role of wife and husband and successfully staying in marital relationship.

Pre-marital counselling deals with the specific concerns related to misconceptions about sex, family planning, pregnancy and children, role sharing in marriage, inter-personal relationships and art of communication, problem solving skills etc. Several other matters that have implications to relationships in marriage are considered during pre-marital counselling. They include religion, customs and practices, social values, mutual trust, personal life style and habits, financial management, role of in-laws, legal aspects of

marriage, and responsibilities and commitments in marriage. When two persons with their own individualities and different backgrounds join in marriage, they need to imbibe the art of adjustment as the key to a prosperous marriage. So the various facets of mutual adjustment are also deliberated in pre-marital counselling; especially for clearing misconceptions. This assists youngsters to approach marriage with a clear and open mind. Sometimes as part of the process even blood tests and medical references are done as precaution against sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS. Blood test also helps in blood group matching. This can contribute to creating a strong foundation for successful marriage.

Pre-marital counselling process helps youngsters master life skills, develop self-esteem and gain confidence in them by realising their potentialities, strengths and weaknesses to face various challenges in their life. These outcomes of pre-marital counselling contribute to success in their marital life. Following is the case of a young lady who was helped into marriage through pre-marital counselling.

Case History

Jane was a 24 year old, beautiful, smart lady from an average middle class Christian family. She was working as a teacher in a convent school. She had serious anxieties over her marriage that was fast approaching. So before entering into the wedlock she was brought for pre-marital counselling, as preparation for her marriage. Jane looked very confused and quite anxious about her wedding; she did not look normal, instead she looked a little perplexed. She was very eager to discuss with the counsellor her perceptions and to get her doubts about marriage cleared.

It was found that Jane's parents had a relationship of marital conflict from the beginning of their marriage and she was exposed to such parental issues and fights from her childhood. This had some negative influence on her; she had certain apprehensions regarding marriage and life because of her bad experiences. Even though she knew her proposed bridegroom and his family very well, still she had some misconceptions regarding marriage and thought that married life meant struggle with problems

and quarrels. It looked as though she had to prepare her mind to face discontentment of marriage if marriage eventually happened. Jane's mother and friends assured her that her life would be different because they knew the bridegroom and his family very well. The bridegroom was an excellent boy, with good habits and behaviour, and employed in a decent job. So Jane's family considered him as an ideal match for her; but she was still worried about her marriage and at times took the haphazard decision to even decline this proposal. Jane's mother then thought that she required some preparation for and clarifications about marriage, and considered pre-marital counselling as the means to help her daughter. As she did not wish to see her daughter's life miserable after marriage, she brought her to the counsellor.

Provisional Analysis

During the initial sessions of counselling Jane looked very confused and worried, and had misconceptions about marriage. When she narrated her parents' bitter experiences she spoke with feelings of pessimism, and said that she lost hope in relationships and marriage. Jane was from a conservative family, and she said that her heart beat faster when she thought about love and marriage. Feelings of anxiety and fear were visible in her talks. She felt that even though her parents had a love marriage it was a total failure. She said that even though her parents fulfilled all her needs she has not experienced any warmth from her quarrelling parents. She justified her stand against marriage by saying that she did not have a role model in marriage. She firmly believed that she was being forced into some unwanted relationship that might lead to problems and tribulations.

To sum up, (i) the client Jane initially expressed feelings of anxiety and was apprehensive about her marriage; (ii) she had pessimistic thoughts about marriage relationships and life; she predicted that even her life after marriage would be miserable like that of her parents; and (iii) she was totally confused with some misconceptions about marriage and marital life.

Case Management

In Jane's case the counsellor first had to create a positive image about marriage and then discuss the constructive aspects of marriage. The

process further involved in explaining to her how to make a marriage successful and why marriages failed.

The counsellor was very supportive in the approach and that facilitated her to change her stand. She was made to understand that the institution of marriage is necessary in human society and, for that reason, inevitable in the life of most individuals. From the societal point of view it is a natural phenomenon which is necessary for procreation and sustenance of humanity. Marriage helps in building a family which is the primary unit of society and binds individual members in close relationships. When one is fully aware of its importance in society and to the individual it gets accepted fast and easily. The counselling sessions helped the client to understand that her anxiety and fears were uncalled for. Just because she witnessed the strained relationship of her parents, she was wrong in generalising that marriages would always turn to be failures. She was made to realise marriage as something natural and normal, and to overcome her pessimistic views regarding marriage. By understanding the real facts of marriage she developed a positive attitude to marriage.

Various issues in marriage as role sharing and responsibilities, sex, family planning, pregnancy, children, art of effective communication, interpersonal relationships and adjustment, role of in-laws, economical and legal aspects of marriage, life patterns and habits, trust and commitment in marriage, and problem solving skills and time management were discussed. She was made to develop her self-confidence, self-esteem and self-dignity. Ego management skills were also discussed so that the client got an insight into all the requisites for steady marital life. The client was made to understand that marriage is a not merely a celebration but a sanctified social institution with certain values, principles and responsibilities attached to it.

By critically examining her parents' married life, various reasons why their marriage failed were examined. It was found that egoism, incompatibility, lack of mutual trust, alcoholism, failure in mutual adjustment and lack of proper understanding of each other were the reasons for the problematic relationships in their marriage. Some examples of successful married life of known people, and the strategies and skills which they used to make their marital life successful were presented to the client.

Follow-up Summary

Follow-up of Jane's case was made in order to get some idea about the impact of pre-marital counselling. She was contacted three years after the counselling sessions were conducted. Following the successful counselling sessions Jane got married, and had a child at the time of contact. She appeared to have faced the challenges of marital life so far with courage, and was able to maintain harmonious relationships with her husband, child and in-laws. She continued to work as school teacher and efficiently balanced her work with family life. She acknowledged the importance and usefulness of the pre-marital counselling in her post-marriage life. Her initial anxieties and fears about marriage did not materialise in her married life. She could well manage the normal situations of ups and downs of life at times faced by her. She was able to develop and maintain her self-esteem. She has continued to keep in touch with the counsellor, who was the guiding force behind her successful marriage. From Jane's experience it is clear that it is in our hands to shape our life into one of happiness and peace.

Conclusion

Many youngsters who get married see only love and romance, but forget the underlying facts about marriage. Even though passion is inevitable, it cannot be the foundation for marriage. It is here that pre-marital counselling is necessary in order to give the youth the proper perspective about marriage and marital life. Today, when the institution of marriage is increasingly threatened by divorce, separation and annulment, pre-marital counselling has become all the more necessary as the first step for marriage preparation. It can help the individuals cope up with the increasing mutual demands and expectations of marriage partners, and thereby reduce the risk factor associated with marital life. Pre-marital counselling imparts to individuals the skills necessary to face future challenges and conflicts in their marriage successfully. It enables them to anticipate the issues and stresses that may crop up in marriage. In short, pre-marital counselling helps youngsters face the realities of marriage successfully with confidence.