

Helpfulness of Premarital Counselling in Building a Healthy Couple Relationship in Heterosexual Couple First Marriages

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Abstract

A majority of people enter into marriage not prepared, not knowing what marriage entails, and without the skills of staying in marriage. This paper explores the helpfulness of marriage preparation, that is premarital counselling, in terms of building a health couple relationship or preventing later problems in heterosexual couples' first marriages. The rate of divorce both in Nigeria and elsewhere around the world indicates a need for preventive steps in preparing couples for marriage. The society needs to find solutions to the alarming rate of divorce. It is also important to note here that solutions that work here must be preventive. This paper is motivated by the negative prospect that approximately half of all recent marriages may end in divorce. Research statistics show that research attention has been mainly placed on the statistics of divorce rates, however, the solution that must be sought must concentrate on creating strong marriages even before they start, rather than intervening in struggling ones. Adopting approaches that are textual and contextual, the paper submits that the area of marriage preparation needs more attention in the field of family therapy. There is need to prepare couple to build strong marriages from the onset rather than trying to amend marriages that have gone wrong.

1. Introduction

Marriage could be said to be one of those natural institutions by which the human species continue to regenerate itself. It is through the institution of marriage that young men and women come together to continue to procreative act that builds the family and sustain the society. Traditionally, every young man or woman looks forward to getting married and as such embraces the opportunity whenever it presents itself. Marriage, also called matrimony, is a formal, legally recognized, and often culturally or religiously sanctioned union between two individuals. It typically involves a commitment to sharing life together as partners and may carry various legal, social, and emotional implications. From a non-ethnocentric point of view, marriage is a culturally sanctioned union between two or more people that establishes certain rights and obligations between the people, between them and their children, and between them and their in-laws (Haviland, Prins, McBride and Walrath, 2011). While the specific details and significance of marriage can vary widely across different cultures, religions, and legal systems, there are several common elements

that define the institution of marriage. Marriage entails certain rights and responsibilities for the couple. It may involve legal contracts, licenses, and registration with government authorities. Societies also typically recognize and validate the marriage through social and cultural norms.

Marriage is much more than a union. At its core, marriage signifies a commitment between two individuals to share their lives together. This commitment involves emotional support, companionship, and collaboration in various aspects of life, including family, finances, and decision-making. Marriage is often built on a romantic and intimate bond between partners. It represents a deeper level of emotional connection and attachment compared to other relationships. Married couples often enjoy legal benefits and rights, including inheritance rights, tax benefits, spousal health care coverage, and social security benefits. These legal advantages are designed to provide stability and support for couples and families. ((Haviland, Prins, McBride and Walrath, 2011).

Traditionally, one of the primary functions of marriage has been to provide a framework for family formation and child-rearing. While societal norms have evolved, many married couples still choose to have children and raise them within the context of marriage. Traditional gender roles and expectations have historically influenced the dynamics within marriages. While these roles are evolving in many societies, they can still play a role in shaping the division of labor and responsibilities within a marriage. Marriage can impact an individual's social status and identity. Married individuals may be perceived differently in society, and their marital status can influence social interactions and the way they are viewed by others (Lévi-Strauss, 1963).

According to Bell (1997), marriage, like any relationship, can face challenges. Communication, conflict resolution, and adapting to changing circumstances are important aspects of maintaining a healthy marriage. Societal norms around marriage are also evolving, with discussions about same-sex marriage, cohabitation, and alternative relationship structures. A successful marriage can provide a supportive environment for personal growth and development. Partners often motivate each other to achieve goals and provide emotional support during difficult times.

2. Marriage and the Society

Anthropologists and sociologists have attempted to define marriage from several perspectives in order to fully accommodate all the nuances and practices connected with marriage in several cultures. However, there seem to be no one exhaustive definition of marriage Bell (1997). Different cultures have different marriage rituals and practices and these rituals and practices condition what they see as marriage. Even within Western culture, definitions of marriage have moved from one extreme to another, and with emergent varying sexual orientations and dispositions, definitions of marriage in the West continue to evolve (Gerstmann, 2004: p. 22). It must be noted that individuals may marry for several reasons, including emotional, legal, social, religious, political and financial.

According to Ember, (2016), marriage is a social institution that holds great significance in many societies around the world. It involves a legally recognized and often culturally sanctioned union between two individuals, typically with the intention of forming a lifelong partnership. The role of marriage in society can vary widely depending on cultural, religious, historical, and legal factors. Marriage can contribute to social stability by providing a framework for the formation of families. Stable families are often seen as fundamental units in society and can provide emotional support, financial stability, and a sense of belonging for individuals.

In almost all societies, Marriage is the recognized institution that admits man and woman into family life. It is an established relationship in which a man and a woman are socially permitted to live together as responsible and respected member of the society without losing their status in the community. As a matter of fact, marriage helps the individuals involved in it to gain a higher status of respect and recognition. In many cultures, marriage is not just about the couple; it has ramifications for the individual families of the man and the woman as well as the larger society. marriage affects the whole society and future generations. Marriage brings some huge responsibilities on the couples and their families. Marriage should not be a concession to human weakness, but an aspiration to continue to creative act of God and as such, a means of spiritual growth. The man and woman become soul mates who, through the institution of marriage, can direct the energy associated with their individual instincts and passion into the progress of their generations and their souls (Haq, 2019).

Westermarck, (2003: p. 71) defines marriage as a more or less concrete connection between a male and a female that lasts beyond the simple procreative act till the birth of the offspring and after. In many societies, marriage is associated with legal and financial benefits. These benefits might include tax advantages, inheritance rights, healthcare access, and spousal insurance coverage. Marriage ceremonies and traditions can vary greatly across cultures and religions. These ceremonies often carry deep cultural and religious significance, contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage and community values. Traditional gender roles and expectations often influence marriage dynamics. These roles can impact division of labor within the household, decision-making processes, and societal perceptions of the roles of spouses.

Historically, marriage has been closely tied to reproduction and family formation. While this association has evolved with changing societal norms and advancements in reproductive technologies, marriage can still play a role in providing a framework for raising children. Married couples often receive social recognition and acceptance from their communities. In many societies, marriage is considered a milestone that signifies commitment and maturity. Marriage can have economic implications for individuals and society as a whole. For instance, marriage patterns can influence workforce participation, consumer spending, and housing markets (Westermarck, 2003).

The concept of marriage has also been subject to debates and controversies, especially regarding issues such as same-sex marriage, polygamy, and arranged marriages. These discussions reflect changing attitudes and evolving societal norms. Marriage often contributes to the formation of extended family networks, fostering emotional and material support systems beyond the nuclear family. As societal norms shift towards valuing individual autonomy and personal choice, the role of marriage in shaping individual lives has also evolved. People may choose to delay or forgo marriage, and alternative relationship structures are being explored. The role of marriage in society is not static and varies significantly across different cultures, historical periods, and social contexts. As societies continue to evolve, so too will the ways in which marriage is perceived and practiced (Eskridge, 1993).

In some areas of the world, arranged marriage, child marriage, polygamy, coverture and forced marriage are practiced, while other outlawed them to protect human rights. The issue of child marriage is really a menace in many parts of the world. Child marriages are not just problems because of the abuse of human sensibility that it often represents, its impact on the reproductive health of the child involved has also become a serious health concern (UNFPA, 2007).

3. Healthy Couple Relationship in Marriage

Robles (2014) avers that a healthy couple relationship is essential for the well-being and stability of a family. The dynamics between partners greatly influence the overall atmosphere and functioning of the family unit. Open and respectful communication between partners goes a long way in fostering understanding, trust, and emotional connection. This positive communication style serves as a model for effective communication within the family and helps family members address conflicts constructively. A healthy couple relationship provides a positive example for children and other family members. Children learn about love, respect, and cooperation by observing their parents' interactions, setting the tone for their own future relationships.

Strong couples provide emotional support for each other, helping each partner navigate life's challenges. This emotional bond serves as a foundation for a supportive family environment where all members feel cared for and valued. Couples with shared values and common goals are more likely to collaborate effectively in parenting and decision-making. A unified front allows for consistent and cohesive parenting strategies, contributing to a stable family structure. Healthy couples demonstrate effective conflict resolution skills, teaching family members how to manage disagreements and solve problems in a respectful and constructive manner. This skill is crucial for maintaining a peaceful family environment (Robles 2014).

Beckes and Coan (2011) write that proximity of partners in a marriage positively impacts on the health of partners as well as on the health of their relationship. Spending quality time together as a couple helps maintain the romantic and intimate aspect of the relationship. This couple time contributes to individual well-being and strengthens the bond between partners. A balanced couple relationship acknowledges the individual needs and aspirations of each partner. This awareness translates into a

family culture that respects and supports each family member's personal growth and interests. Healthy couples can offer each other emotional support during stressful times. This support contributes to a resilient family that can better manage challenges and crises.

A strong couple relationship positively influences parenting effectiveness. Partners who work well together can provide consistent parenting and model teamwork, creating a stable and nurturing environment for their children. The couple relationship plays a role in how extended family members are integrated into the family unit. Clear boundaries and respectful interactions between partners and their respective families can prevent conflicts and promote harmony. Couples who adapt well to changes, such as new family members, career transitions, or relocations, demonstrate flexibility and resilience. These qualities contribute to the family's ability to adjust to life's inevitable changes.

A supportive and caring couple relationship can positively impact partners' physical and mental health (Burman and Margolin 1992). When partners prioritize each other's well-being, they can collectively create an environment of holistic health for the entire family. A healthy couple relationship serves as the cornerstone of a strong family unit. By fostering positive communication, emotional support, teamwork, and effective conflict resolution, couples contribute to a nurturing environment that benefits both partners and the entire family.

4. The Need for Premarital Counselling

Premarital counseling is a form of therapy or guidance that couples undergo before getting married. It offers a structured opportunity for couples to discuss and address important topics, concerns, and potential challenges that may arise during their marriage. Premarital counseling helps couples develop effective communication skills. Learning how to express feelings, needs, and concerns openly and respectfully lays the foundation for healthy communication throughout the marriage. Learning how to navigate conflicts and disagreements is crucial for a successful marriage. Premarital counseling provides tools and strategies to resolve conflicts in a constructive manner, reducing the likelihood of escalated disputes (Robles, *et al* 2014).

Couples come from diverse family backgrounds with different values and traditions. Exploring these differences can help couples understand each other's perspectives and find ways to merge their backgrounds in a harmonious way. Couples often have different expectations about various aspects of marriage, such as roles, finances, family involvement, and career goals. Premarital counseling helps couples identify and discuss these expectations, ensuring they are on the same page. Financial disagreements are a common source of conflict in marriages. Premarital counseling addresses financial planning, budgeting, and decision-making, helping couples create a shared understanding of their financial goals. Premarital counseling provides a safe space to discuss intimacy, sexuality, and emotional needs. Couples can openly explore their desires, concerns, and expectations in this area (Eskridge, 1993).

Couples may have differing views on parenting styles, family size, and child-rearing practices. Premarital counseling helps couples align their parenting philosophies and discuss family planning decisions. Marriage can introduce new stressors. Premarital counseling equips couples with stress management techniques, helping them support each other during challenging times. Couples can maintain their individual identities while building a shared life. Premarital counseling encourages partners to explore their personal growth goals while nurturing their relationship. Establishing healthy boundaries with extended family members and friends is crucial for marital harmony. Premarital counseling addresses how to maintain appropriate boundaries while respecting each other's families and friendships (Eskridge, 1993).

Every couple is unique, and the content and approach of premarital counseling can vary. Some couples may benefit from religious or culturally specific counseling, while others may prefer a more secular and therapeutic approach. Ultimately, the goal of premarital counseling is to provide couples with the tools and insights they need to build a strong and resilient marriage. Marriage involves navigating life's ups and downs. Premarital counseling teaches couples how to build resilience and cope with challenges together. Premarital counseling is proactive. It aims to prevent future conflicts and misunderstandings by addressing potential issues early on. Participating in premarital counseling shows a commitment to investing in the relationship's long-term success. It demonstrates a willingness to learn, grow, and adapt as a couple.

Counselling Mechanisms

In premarital counseling, attention is focused on both psychological and emotional mechanisms. These are mechanisms that can impact on the individual's disposition to the other in a marriage relationship. Robles, *et al* (2014) state that these mechanisms exerts effects on daily basis on the individuals while influencing biological mediators that can impact on both the health of the individuals and the health of their marriage relationship. Social-cognitive processes which describes how individuals think and see their partners, also helps to explain spousal behaviour (Bradbury and Fincham, 1990). Emotional processes will indicate how the individuals involved in marriage control each other's emotional experience and expression. The willingness of each of the partners to support and the other is a very important resource in minimizing extreme emotions like anxiety, sadness or even depression (Beckes and Coan, 2011). These processes can then influence the biological mechanisms. For instance, the individual partner's willingness to disclose their thoughts and feelings to one another goes a long way in reducing stress felt by the other partner and improving sleep which is crucial for good health.

5. Conclusion

From the foregoing, premarital counseling can lead to several positive outcomes that contribute to a healthier, more fulfilling marriage. While the specific results may vary based on individual circumstances and the focus of the counseling, however, generally, premarital counselling is very enriching. Couples develop effective communication techniques, allowing them to express thoughts, feelings, and concerns openly and respectfully. This improved communication can prevent

misunderstandings and conflicts. Couples learn strategies for resolving conflicts in a productive and non-destructive manner. They gain insights into active listening, compromise, and finding solutions that work for both partners.

Premarital counseling helps couples identify and address unrealistic or unspoken expectations about marriage. This alignment of expectations reduces the likelihood of disappointment or frustration later on. Through counseling exercises and discussions, couples deepen their emotional connection and understanding of each other, fostering a stronger bond. Couples acquire problem-solving skills that allow them to tackle challenges together, preventing issues from escalating into major conflicts. Counseling addresses financial management, helping couples create a shared approach to budgeting, spending, and saving. This can reduce financial conflicts and stress. Couples discuss intimacy and learn how to nurture their emotional and physical connection. This can lead to greater relationship satisfaction and a more fulfilling intimate life (Robles, *et al* 2014).

Counseling equips couples with techniques for managing stress individually and as a team, helping them support each other during difficult times. Couples with plans for starting a family should gain insights into parenting styles, discipline, and family planning, laying the foundation for a cohesive approach to raising children. Counseling helps couples establish and maintain healthy boundaries with extended family members and friends, reducing potential sources of tension. Couples develop resilience and coping skills, enabling them to navigate life's challenges and uncertainties with greater confidence. Partners gain a deeper understanding of themselves, their needs, and their values. This self-awareness can lead to personal growth and a more harmonious relationship (Robles, *et al* 2014).

By addressing potential issues before marriage, couples can prevent certain conflicts from arising or becoming major problems down the line. Participating in premarital counseling signals a commitment to the relationship and a willingness to invest in its long-term success. It also prepares couples to face the realities of marriage with greater awareness and readiness. The skills and insights gained from premarital counseling provide a foundation for ongoing relationship growth and maintenance throughout the marriage. Premarital counseling aims to equip couples with the tools and knowledge they need to build a strong and healthy marital relationship. It provides a proactive approach to addressing potential challenges, fostering understanding, and promoting the overall well-being of both partners.

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