



Professional Counseling

What To Expect

by Andrew Graham

Many couples recognize that they are in distress and are unable to resolve their issues, but they are unwilling to seek professional help because of an inaccurate conceptualization of what professional counseling looks like. Caricatures of professional counseling abound; professional counselors are seen as aloof cigar-smokers who doodle on scratch-pads while clients lying on couches talk about their childhood; or they are seen as secular humanists who give unconditional affirmation for those engaged in sinful behavior.

These are inaccurate. There are indeed quality professional counselors who are conservative Christians and who have the education and experience to guide couples through their distress to a God-honoring marital relationship. Debunking the stereotypes and providing a brief overview of what can be expected from professional marital counseling is a key component in helping those in distress.

SELECTION OF A PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR

In selecting a professional counselor, a couple wants to make sure the counselor possesses the education and experience to provide the counseling services you need. Even more important, particularly to conservative Christians, is the worldview of the counselor. For both of

these concerns, it is helpful to consult one of two registries (see p.27) maintained by the American Association of Christian Counselors and Focus on the Family. These two organizations screen self-identifying Christian counselors to ensure their professional credentials and their commitment to conservative Christian principles.

After identifying and contacting a professional counselor, a couple can expect to be scheduled for an assessment session that usually lasts 90-120 minutes and typically costs \$120-\$240; subsequent sessions are generally 45-60 minutes long and cost \$90-\$150. Rates vary by region, and many professional counselors offer a sliding scale for those with a lower household income; some Christian professional counselors offer a discount for couples who are in full-time Christian ministry.

ASSESSMENT

Most professional counselors who work with couples start by assessing the individuals and their relationship. While some do this through an interview alone, most often a specific assessment strategy is employed.

A professional counselor may ask that a couple complete a written or online assessment tool. The most popular relationship assessment tool is the PREPARE/ENRICH: PREPARE for premarital couples, and ENRICH

for married couples. The tool is completed by each person independently and assesses the relationship on areas such as communication, conflict resolution, roles, sexuality, finances, spiritual beliefs, personality, and relationship dynamics. This information is helpful to counselors, giving them an idea of how both individuals are thinking and feeling. It helps to identify areas in which the couple have strong agreement and compatibility and areas in which they need to grow in their relationship and understanding of one another.

Instead of a formal written assessment, a professional counselor may choose to create a genogram with the couple. A genogram is similar in structure to a family tree, except that it includes visual representations of relationship dynamics. This approach is usually accomplished through interviews.

An interview can be short or long, depending on the context of the counseling and the presenting problem. For a couple seeking some brief marital counseling, a few questions might suffice: what is your presenting concern? How long have you had this concern? What have you tried in the past to address this concern? What worked and what didn't work? If the issue could be completely resolved in an instant, how would your relationship look different than it does now?

ORIENTATION TO COUNSELING

Regardless of the assessment protocol used by the professional counselor, orientation to counseling is usually the next agenda item. In some settings, confidentiality and its limits are addressed even before the initial assessment.

As licensed providers of services, professional counselors are required to secure permission to provide counseling services; this is usually called Informed Consent or Consent to Treat. This document usually includes information about the counselor's professional background, education, credentialing, and worldview; session duration and length of counseling; access to the counselor outside the session; fees for services; explanations about the effectiveness of counseling as well as risks; procedures related to what to do in case of an emergency or complaint; as well as confidentiality and its limits.

Professional counselors are required to maintain confidentiality. Information disclosed during a confidential relationship cannot be shared without the permission of the individual who shared it—with a few important exceptions, such as child abuse, elder abuse, or suicidal or homicidal intent. Apart from these exceptions, counselors are required to assert privilege; information can only be shared with the specific permission of the individual who shared it. In couples counseling, it is important for the profes-

sional counselor to discuss with the couple the level of confidentiality if one of the spouses discloses information while the other is not present.

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Once the couple seeking counseling has been assessed and oriented to counseling, professional counselors often reference some key marital enrichment resources that pertain to the couples' specific presenting issue.

These resources might include select passages of Scripture that describe commitment in marriage, such as Matthew 19:6: "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (ESV). They might include a brief overview of the Chapman's five love languages (words of affirmation, acts of service, quality time, gifts, and physical touch) and how important it is to identify the primary love language of each spouse so that their needs are properly met. Or perhaps relevant resources include reflections on Eggerichs' *Love and Respect* or Harley's *His Needs, Her Needs* models.

Many professional counselors encourage couples in distress to engage in homework activities between sessions. Often, these sorts of resources include a collaborative study of Scripture or reading from selected books on Christian marriage (see list on p.9).

EVIDENCE-BASED TREATMENT STRATEGIES

Professional counseling is about more than assessment, education, and advice-giving. It is more than providing marital enrichment exercises and recommended reading lists. It is also about using evidence-based strategies that help couples to reach their goals of conflict resolution and improved relationships. One such evidence-based model of couples counseling is Worthington's Hope-Focused Marital Therapy, a model grounded in both Scriptural support and empirical support.

In the Hope-Focused model, following assessment and orientation comes goal-development—to be sure that both spouses are heading in the same direction. Interventions are then selected by the professional counselor that match the goals for counseling.

CONCLUSION

Not all couples in distress need professional counseling. Those who do should locate a trained professional who can guide them to change their current patterns of functioning in a way that preserves their marital commitment and brings glory to God. ■

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