

BASIC PROCEDURE FOR CHRIST-CENTERED MARRIAGE COUNSELING: *SPIRITUOTHERAPY*TM MODEL

PRE-APPOINTMENT

When a husband or wife inquires about receiving counseling through GFI, they are offered encouragement and hope. Then a brief description of the approach is offered. If there is an interest in proceeding, they are invited to acquire the two basic books: *The Ins and Out of Rejection* and *Handbook to Happiness*. Preliminary reading includes chapters 1 and 2 in Parts 1 and 2 of the former, and chapters 1, 2, and 5 of the latter. A packet of information is picked up with the books. This includes the forms (personal information, waiver of liability, informed consent, financial guidelines), and (at GFI) the Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis© (T-JTA). Answer sheets are given for each to take the questionnaire on themselves. Sometimes the counselor asks them to take a second test, answering the questions as related to the spouse (as perceived by the test-taker). This use of the TJTA is known as the 'criss-cross', and is indicative of how the husband and wife perceive each other.

INITIAL INTERVIEWS

Unlike conventional approaches to marital counseling, the couple is primarily counseled individually. This strategy is used because, as Dr. Solomon puts it, "the problem is in the people, not the marriage".

The initial sessions proceed as in the usual *Spirituotherapy*TM strategy. During the first part of the initial interview, the counselee's 'presenting problem' will likely emphasize problems in the marriage. The counselor asks about the context of current struggles and what may have been the incident(s) that prodded one or both of them to get help. The intake form will indicate if they have had previous marital counseling. If so, inquire as to the nature and results of those sessions. If necessary, briefly contrast their previous counseling (such as medical, psychological, or biblical law-based approaches) with the approach used in *Spirituotherapy*TM. This would include the Exchanged Life emphasis on being in order to do, changing from the inside out, and dealing with the root cause, rather than the symptoms. The authority and relevance of the Bible is affirmed as rather than personal opinion being the basis for direction. The counselor should show empathy and offer hope in this preliminary stage.

The husband and/or wife needs to agree to put the marriage problems and arguments on hold during the initial *Spirituotherapy*TM process. As the counselee allows God to work in his/her life, the Lord will be the One to convict and change the spouse. Communication of the husband and wife should be limited to the positive biblical discoveries being made (resulting in fellowship and edification) and discussing more neutral issues. This gives the counselees more of an opportunity to learn and respond to the Exchanged Life message, rather than being distracted by interpersonal conflicts.

When they are willing to proceed, the counselor continues with the history-taking session. This will include the usual chronology with a view to identifying their natural identity, coping mechanisms, and other issues related to diagnosing the 'self-life'. The helper should pay attention to the information regarding the couple's courtship, marriage, and path of marital and family experiences. If infidelity has occurred, this should be dealt with on the resurrection side of the cross (as with other issues related to improving the marriage relationship).

The counselor should not give advice to the counselee regarding separation, divorce, or moving back together; these decisions should be made by the counselee with God's wisdom. He/she is responsible for decisions made and the consequences. If the counselor makes a decision for them, he/she will be held responsible for the consequences!

Even if they are not obedient to the Lord in some area, continue to show love and acceptance to them personally, while not condoning the wrong behavior.

The counselor should be informed about the state or national laws concerning spousal abuse and child abuse, taking note of when he/she is legally required to report abuse to authorities. (This possibility is noted on the informed consent form that the couple signed prior to counseling.) A wife may need to know that she is morally and legally free to report physical abuse from the husband. Personal forgiveness does not absolve the abusive partner from the law. However, such decisions are in the hands of the counselee. They may choose to reaffirm moral guidelines to the spouse (e.g., no hitting or pushing), forgive, and express grace by the power of Christ's presence within.

COUNSELING THE COUPLE TOGETHER

The counselor should avoid mentioning to the couple sensitive information that was confidentially shared in an individual session. If something was disclosed that is relevant to the session, ask open ended question(s) to allow this information to surface voluntarily, then it can be mentioned in the sessions with the couple.

If, after the counselees have surrendered to God and appropriated Christ as Life (e.g, by sincerely praying the *Selfer's Prayer*), the next sessions can be conducted with the couple being together during the appointments. They must agree to allow the counselor to guide the agenda, including the policy of refraining from arguments and fault-finding. The counselor is not a referee.

The counseling process continues by reinforcing their new perspective with Christ as the center of their life. The helper offers empathy and encouragement and tracks the couple's spiritual progress. Homework should be assigned (such as listening to a tape or watching a video/DVD). Checking on their compliance is a beneficial way of monitoring their interest, commitment, and learning. If peace is being restored, this homework can be done together to encourage communication and relational growth

FREEDOM IN CHRIST

Present the larger counseling context of the 'four phases': Salvation, Exchanged Life, Freedom in Christ, and Continuing Discipleship.

The need of forgiveness will likely be an important factor in marital restoration. See the article *Dimensions of Forgiveness* on the course CD for a three level model for this vital topic. The step of 'relinquishment' of grievances should occur first (usually in the one-to-one freedom in Christ session(s). After the couple learns of the principles and conditions for 'reconciliation' and 'restoration', the counselor may facilitate some reconciliation dialog between the husband and wife.

If a more systematic freedom in Christ process would be helpful and desirable to the counselees, the *Seven Steps to Freedom* could be used (Freedom in Christ Ministries). This involves guiding the counselee through this series of biblical affirmations and more thorough confession and renunciation of sin patterns and false beliefs. This should be done with the same gender (male counselor with male client). Have someone of the other gender trained to take the other counselee through these steps.

There are also Steps to Freedom designed for *Setting Your Marriage Free* and *Beginning Your Marriage Free* (Chapter 14 in Anderson and Mylander's book). These are used with the couple together after the individual process is done.

If a deep hurt is evidently holding back a counselee, even after the 'truth encounter', healing prayer can be used as well. Other resources for the freedom phase include Beth Moore's *Praying God's Word* and the workbook *Breaking Free: Making Liberty in Christ a Reality in Life* and Jim Logan's *Reclaiming Surrendered Ground: Protecting Your Family from Spiritual Attacks*.

MARITAL DISCIPLESHIP

When the foundation of identification and liberation has been laid, the couple is ready for biblical guidance that more directly relates to marriage enrichment and/or other family and personal issues.

There are many books, audio materials, and videos on marriage and parenting that can now be used. The counselor would do well to build and use a lending library. If not, the resources and ordering information could be recommended. After describing the different resources for homework, the husband and/or wife can be involved in selecting the ones which seem most relevant and interesting. (If they help choose the resource, they will be more likely to acquire it and be motivated to benefit from it.) If they can afford to purchase resources, this would be an investment in their marriage, as well as a tool they can use to help others.

Family resources with an Exchanged Life orientation will be practical but also support a grace-oriented perspective. Parenting resources include the workbooks by David and Denise Glenn. Motherwise.org and Fatherwise.org have these materials available. Bill and Anabel Gillham's book, *He Said, She Said* is available through Lifetime Guarantee (Lifetime.org). Their *The Life* video seminar concludes with three sessions on the Christ-centered marriage relationship. Anne Trippe's book covers marriage issues from an identity in Christ perspective (Fba.org).

Of the many mainline evangelical resources to use after the Cross becomes a reality see the course Recommended Resources list below. This list is suggestive, not exhaustive. Also, the materials on the course CD can be useful in this marriage discipleship phase.

If the counselor desires to use an assessment tool to evaluate areas for more specific marital guidance, the Enrich Inventory is a popular choice. Prepare/Enrich will be described in the resources section below.

If goals were identified earlier in the counseling process, there could be an evaluation of improvements occurring as a by-product of the Cross and personal freedom steps. Some additional goal(s) may surface that could determine the focus of the remaining counseling sessions.

MEETING NEEDS IN MARRIAGE

The issue of unmet needs is typically a driving force in marital problems and in seeking counseling. It is imperative that the Christ-Centered counselor interpret such needs in the context of *Spirituotherapy*TM.

I. Ultimate Needs

1. Love
2. Acceptance
3. Significance
4. Security
5. Belonging
6. Worth

The ultimate needs are only fulfilled through abiding in Christ (Phil. 4:19; Psalm 73:24-26; Col. 1:17:2:10). The single person is complete in Christ, even though they do not have marital 'needs' met. Paul exemplified this fulfillment:

Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Phil. 4:11-13, NKJV).

RELATIONAL NEEDS IN MARRIAGE

In the book *His Needs, Her Needs*, Dr. Willard F. Harley identifies five prominent 'needs' of the wife and the husband in marriage. These are based upon his observations in over 25 years as a marriage and family therapist.

Relational Needs of the Wife

1. Affection
2. Conversation
3. Honesty and Openness
4. Financial Support
5. Family Commitment

Relational Needs of the Husband

1. Sexual Fulfillment
2. Recreational Companionship
3. An Attractive Spouse
4. Domestic Support
5. Admiration

- *His Needs, Her Needs*, Fleming H. Revell, 1986.

These needs are described, illustrated, and discussed in the book as important responsibilities for each spouse to 'meet the needs' of the other. The stated goal of this awareness and commitment is to 'affair proof the marriage'.

In Christ-Centered counseling, this material may be useful in 'phase four' (after salvation, identification, and freedom).

It is important to relate the Exchanged Life to the concept of 'needs'. Self/flesh LOVES the idea of needs! The needs listed by Harley should be designated as RELATIONAL needs. In other words, a husband will be happier if his wife shows her love in these ways. And the wife would be happier if the husband loved her in these ways. However, through the Cross, the counselees discover only One source to provide for ULTIMATE needs.

And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:19).

To introduce this material earlier to couples would focus them on their expectations and self-life, rather than brokenness and abiding.

SUMMARY

The tendency for married people will be to focus on self's 'needs' and expect total fulfillment from the spouse. Instead, God calls us to relationship with Him as our greatest need and highest good. Abiding in Christ is the only way to discover spiritual fulfillment as described by the psalmist:

Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul, Like a weaned child with his mother; Like a weaned child is my soul within me (Psalm 131:2).

Any substitute for full devotion to God becomes a form of idolatry. However, when you let Christ live through you, love for your neighbor will be the sum of your moral responsibilities, and your spouse is your closest 'neighbor'. Knowing their spouse's needs gives direction to the how unconditional love should be expressed (1 Cor. 13). Instead of 50/50, the biblical model of commitment is 100/100. Marital love is shown *as unto the Lord*.

CLARIFYING THE ROLE OF COUNSELOR

One of the problems counselors are often drawn into is the pressure by one or both marriage partners to force the erring one to change. This puts the counselor in the role of referee instead of clinical discipler. The only true referee is mentioned in Colossians 3:15:

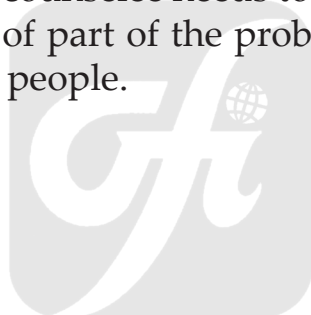
And let the peace of God rule [arbitrate, act as referee] in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.

Otherwise, the session can quickly slip into a time of mutual criticism and blame-shifting. The husband tries to make his wife submit; the wife is critical of the husband's lack of love. The husband is frustrated over infrequent sex; the wife is upset over the husband's careless handling of finances, etc.

Such 'therapy' cannot bring about positive spiritual and relational growth in the couple. The preceding section on the role of *Spirituootherapy*[™] advocated the wisdom of working with the husband and wife individually until they are on 'the resurrection side of the Cross'. Then teaching and application can be discussed on relevant growth areas such as communication, roles, sexual adjustment, handling finances, parenting, etc.

In some cases, only one spouse will be willing to take the initiative and responsibility for improving the marriage. How can the counselor help this person? Again, God intends to use the marital difficulties to bring this counselee to full surrender and appropriation of his/her identification with Christ by faith. Success is primarily experiencing God; the improved marriage is a secondary goal.

Instead of thinking that a husband can force or manipulate his wife to change (and vice versa), the counselee needs to partner with God so as to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem. The Holy Spirit does a much better job of changing people.



RESOURCES

Anderson, Neil and Charles Mylander. *Christ-Centered Marriage*. (Regal, 1996). www.FIC.org

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Prokopchak, Steve and Mary. *Called Together*. Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 2003.

Strauss, Richard and Mary. *When Two Walk Together*. Here's Life Publisher's, 1988.

Trippe, Anne. *Marriage! The Journey: From Neediness & Myths to God's Fulfillment*. Belleville, ON: Essence Publishing, 2004.

Wheat, Ed. *Love Life for Every Married Couple*. Zondervan, 1980.