

PREPARE ENRICH

• *building strong marriages* •

Working with Conflicted and Devitalized Couples

Goals in Working with Conflicted and Devitalized Couples:

- Instill couple with hope that their relationship can improve. (*You may choose to tell them that in a study of unhappy marriages, 2/3 of couples who stayed married reported they were happy five years later five years**). Relationships are ever-evolving and all will experience “ups” and “downs”.
- Identify and build their strengths as a couple
- Help couples understand that they share responsibility for the state of their relationship
- Help each partner learn to appreciate the impact of their behavior on the other
- Develop their communication and conflict resolution skills

Using PREPARE/ENRICH with Conflicted and Devitalized Couples:

- Discuss and praise a couple’s commitment to their relationship and willingness to work to make it better
- Identify and help them build their strengths. If the couple does not have any “category” strengths, look for specific Agreement items within categories.
- Begin by assessing, and if necessary, bolstering the couple’s communication by teaching assertiveness and active listening.
- Develop conflict resolution skills using the *Ten Steps for Resolving Couple Conflict*. Use the Ten Step Model several times with them, beginning with less complex issues, and then moving toward more complex issues.
- Augment your sessions by assigning “homework” from the *Couple’s Workbook* and/or chapters in *The Couple Checkup* book.

Key Concerns:

- As these couples are at greater risk for abuse and divorce, share your concerns with them and gain their commitment to work on the relationship. This will often require 6-10 more intensive counseling sessions.
- Always consider your limitations in terms of time, experience, and professional expertise when working with distressed couples.
- Develop a referral network of collaborative partners to assist you in your work and know when to refer couples to a marital therapist with more expertise.

Counseling Tips with Conflicted and Devitalized Couples:

- Avoid labeling a couple as “conflicted” or “devitalized.” These “couple types” may be helpful for you as Facilitator but may be demoralizing for a couple and limit their vision of change (*use discretion in deciding whether or not the “Couple Report” should be given to a conflicted or devitalized couple*).
- If the experience of expressing emotions becomes too intense, it may be best to wait until these feelings are more manageable (and defensiveness diminishes) before you ask couples to continue with the process of exploring emotions. At this point you may decide to shift to positive reflections, such as, “Tell me about the time you first met”, or “What did you like about each other when you were first dating”?
- Focus on both the content of what this couple says as well as their interactions with each other (e.g. what do you notice about their body language; does one partner “speak for the other”, etc.). Tell the couple what you notice and ask them to think about the meaning of their interaction pattern (is it a pattern they have developed over time; how does it serve- or not serve-the relationship, etc.)

Questions to ask Conflicted and Devitalized couples (to increase empathy and facilitate self and relationship awareness):

- What made it possible for you to share _____ (feelings, thoughts, and experiences) today with one another?
- How did you anticipate _____ (partner) would respond when _____ (e.g. “you said _____”)?
- Are there any questions you have about how _____ (partner) responded?
- In what ways do you imagine your perception of _____ (event) may be different than your partners?
- What do you (one partner) suspect was the motivation for _____ (other partner’s) actions?
- What are successes you have had in your relationship?
- What are 3 goals you have for your relationship?

*Waite, L., Browning, D., Doherty, W.J., Gallagher, M., Luo, Y., Stanley, S. (2002). USA Today article: Does Divorce Make People Happy?

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