

BY DR SHANON ROBERTS

# *6 Things to Consider When Choosing Marriage Counseling*

HOW NOT TO MAKE THE BIGGEST MISTAKE WHEN  
RESTORING YOUR MOST IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIP



Starting the process of choosing to enter into marital counseling, as well as, choosing who to do it with can be an overwhelming task. In fact, studies show that couples consider making that first appointment for a minimum of four years before actually going. There are many reasons for this, but some of that is just not knowing. Considering this is the most important relationship, you can never be too careful. This guide can better help you understand some of the things that will make you a well-informed client while you make an educated decision.



# 1

## *The approach to counseling can be more important than credentials*

There are many kinds of licensed professionals that can legally charge for marital counseling. Licensed Professional Counselors (LPC), Licensed Mental Health Counselors (LMHC), Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists (LMFT), Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSW), Clinical Psychologists (Ph.D./Psy. D.), and Pastoral Counselors are all qualified and regulated through each state's licensing board. However, being legally allowed and actually having the necessary training to be effective are two different things. Many practitioners will use an individual model of counseling across the board for both their couples and individual clientele. Outcome studies show this type of marital counseling does not prove to be effective. In fact, straight psycho-education, cognitive skill building, and just talk therapy have not shown to be appropriate interventions for overall change. Many of my couples who have tried a variety of counselors have reported that some have allowed them to have the same distressing dialogues in their office as they do at home with relatively little intervention from the therapist.

Choosing a therapist that is specifically trained in a model of couples/marital counseling is an important aspect to consider. Knowing the model and how many hours of training the therapist has received are valid questions in the interviewing phase of choosing. When choosing where you want to invest your time and money, you would want to choose the most reliable "brand." Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) is a model that has been formulated specifically for romantic partners that have shown exponential results. "Research studies find that 70-75% of couples move from distress to recovery and approximately 90% show significant improvements" (<http://www.iceeft.com/index.php/about-us/what-is-eft>). There is a 3-phase training process that allows professional practitioners to become specialized in this approach. Although there are other models that seem to be showing promising results as well, these statistics are some of the highest being reported

## 2

# *There should be science to match the model of counseling that is used*

Unlike times in the past, mental and emotional researched science. It is not necessarily a guessing game or a theory from educated, philosophical experts or theologians. The research reveals the science. The science guides and informs the building of the intervention. A therapist that is well-versed in a particular marital intervention model should be able to describe why this particular approach is being utilized based on the science and research from which it is built.

In the case of marital counseling, the field of science in the area of attachment and romantic attachment has grown in the most recent years. Science shows that reproduced experiences in the counseling room with the appropriate use of emotions, rather than avoidance or destructive use of emotions, are healing and curative. The founder of EFT, Dr. Sue Johnson, has created a compilation of this research that is put into a layperson's terminology in a book entitled Love Sense. This book does an excellent job of bridging the science to the justification of an intervention model.



# 3

## *As a Christian, the model and science should not contradict Scripture*

It is a well-researched fact that most Christian environment incorporates some type of faith-based element to the setting. With that being said, the counseling field is beginning to recognize that addressing the whole person even from a spiritual basis is important, as well as, uniquely honoring each person's spiritual beliefs and value system.

Finding a therapist that knows and utilizes the sensitivities of Christian couples, especially in the arena of marriage brings about confidence with the couples that incorporates a safety and working alliance necessary for the work in the sessions. God reveals himself both through Scripture and Creation. He is not confusing; science and Scripture are not contradictory. A therapist that is sensitive to Christian couples will be able to explain how their faith will be incorporated into the counseling practices.

EFT is a model that is not in conflict with Scripture. As a board-certified professional Christian counselor, bringing the spiritual objectives into the model, as the couple is comfortable, allows the sensitivity to Christian couples that they are most looking for. God, as part of their relationship, is incorporated using the God attachment literature and research (Rowatt, W. and Kirkpatrick, L. A. (2002), Two Dimensions of Attachment to God and Their Relation to Affect, Religiosity, and Personality Constructs. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 41: 637-651. doi: 10.1111/1468-5906.00143). The Marriage Made Whole counseling program incorporates the God-attachment literature and adds the spiritual component to the EFT marriage intervention. This model has also been tested scientifically with equally effective statistics.

# 4

## *The therapist is an important factor*

Finding the right fit with the therapist and understanding. In fact, the literature reveals that it could be up to 40% of the effectiveness of counseling. The alliance that is built between the client and counselor, the safety that is felt in the sessions, and the belief in the effectiveness of the professional all provide the necessary basis from which the work is done.

Literature also supports that Christian clients search for like-minded therapists that share in their same value set. The therapists that promote themselves as Christian counselors will be comfortable answering any personal questions along these lines that will bring a comfort level to the choice you are making.



# 5

## *There should be a specific structure to the course of the counseling objectives*

As a thirty-year-plus veteran in this field, I've worked with individuals and couples alike that have been to several other counselors in the past. After asking a few questions about their previous experiences, many cannot identify any treatment objectives that were identified or how many sessions were recommended in order to complete these objectives. They just simply, at some point, quit going when things seemed to be better. This nebulous beginning and ending point doesn't necessarily bring a lot of confidence into the picture when choosing a path. A therapist that has a clear structure of how they will help facilitate you to an end result should be what you are seeking.

Of course, each couple is uniquely different and will have some subtle changes and number of sessions to meet their individual needs; however, a

specific map of how one can get through the necessary constructs for overall change with an identified number of sessions is a valid expectation. If you were going to a medical doctor, this would be the protocol. Depending on your unique situation, the EFT model recommends a minimum of 12-20 sessions as an effective intervention to find overall improvement in distressed couples. This model has nine steps within three stages of counseling that build on one another and provides a consistent structure to the counseling process. It ensures that you are moving forward and not just showing up to talk about "issues" for an hour. These same steps/stages have been incorporated into the steps of The Marriage Made Whole program while also incorporating spiritual interventions as well.

# 6

## *An intensive marriage counseling setting is most effective*

Couples intensives, in comparison to offer creative solutions. Research shows that the intensive model for couples counseling, similar to inpatient settings, has a higher rate of long-term, sustained improvement for marital couples. In an intensive, one couple works with one therapist for several hours, for duration of 2 to 3 days in a row. The couple is able to get an equivalent of six months of outpatient counseling at the completion. Couples often find this option refreshing. The process enables quick relief and visible results. The couple doesn't have to worry about incorporating or prioritizing the counseling into their already strained calendar. The intensive setting allows the focus to be on underlying issues within the marriage while avoiding the distractions of day-to-day demands of life which occur between sessions when done in an outpatient format. This creative approach is not limited to the boxed in hourly session time frame, making best use of time as there in not

wasted time transitioning in and out of the hour session, allowing for flexible amounts of time to stay in the therapeutic zone until completion.

The work dictates time, not the clock. Marriage counseling intensives create anonymity by allowing the couple to travel to a destination and not see a counselor within their community. This opens the options of being able to pick the absolute best expert in the field and not be limited to just the counselors in their area. It can also add the lovely benefit of visiting an ideal location that allows the couple to tack on some days of celebration post their intensive experience, a second honeymoon possibly?



# ***NEXT STEPS***

If you have made it to the end of this publication, you seem invested and interested in this! So what do you need to do next? I offer many options available to you.

Go to my "About Me" to check out more at:  
[shanonrobertscounseling.com/about](http://shanonrobertscounseling.com/about)

If you want to hear of other couples' experiences in The Marriage Made Whole™ program go to:  
[shanonrobertscounseling.com/testimonials](http://shanonrobertscounseling.com/testimonials)

Join in the discussion in my FREE Facebook Group at:  
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If you are ready to book your FREE 30-Minute Consultation with me go to:  
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I look forward to honoring you in your and your spouse's journey back to the same passionate love you had at the time you said "I do!"