

# Observations From an Old Pro on Marriage Counseling By Harvey Kelber, L.C.P.C.

I would like to share some thoughts with you on marriage counseling. I have had a private practice for 38 years. I started before licensure. AMHCA, or IMHCA existed. When I began I was a high school counselor, so I assumed that I would have an adolescent practice. The immediate referrals to me were adults, and very soon that lead to couples counseling. This was an early lesson to me that we never know where or how our names are given out that leads to referrals, nor the kind of new clients they produce.

As I gained more experience in working with couples, I developed a model which I use today. The initial contact is usually by one partner. When I started, 95% of these contacts were from wives. Today I think it is about 60%. I have more and more husbands initiating counseling because they do not want to lose their wives. I think this is a healthy change resulting from the transition in women's abilities to generate an independent income and having their expectations raised for their marriages. They are no longer willing to accept the rigid limitations imposed by traditional role models.

The following is the model I have developed. If either party or both are contemplating a divorce, request that they commit to ten sessions. I justify this on my experience that with fewer sessions, I end up feeling like I violated the Hippocratic Oath injunction, above all else, do no harm. I tell them in my experience, if I have 10-12 weeks to work with them they will not be worse off for the effort. When we start they have agreed that at the tenth session, they will either: One, agree that they have the tools to resolve the issues that brought them to counseling, and we are done; two, we have made a good start

and they want to continue; or three, either party has decided they want a divorce and the counseling stops. Feedback from my clients has shown me that better divorces have come out of their efforts in our counseling.

My first contact is spending time with each party alone. When I meet any new client I have three items on my agenda. The first is to give my background and to answer any questions about me. The second is to get a thumbnail of who they are, starting with their family of origin. The third is to talk about why we are meeting.

After this initial contact I tell the couple my preference is to not have individual sessions while we are doing couples counseling. Both parties have access to me by phone and can share anything pertinent

**Can I do it, is it doable,  
is it worth doing,  
how do I think about the idea?**

that they would not share with me in front of their mates. I do this to minimize triangulation during counseling.

During our first session together I ask each to work on a druthers list before our next session. I explain that this is a list of changes they would like to make in their mates, themselves, and anything in the relationship. I ask them not to discuss their lists with each other, but to bring three copies to our next session. My druthers list assignment is preceded by me giving each of them a copy of a handout I developed. (\*Please contact me if you would like a copy).

The packet includes an by Sydney J.

Harris, who says that couples that do not get divorced are couple who have a willingness to change for each other. This sets the context for me asking for their druthers list. At our next session we share the druthers lists and I tell them that I will use their lists for the remainder of our counseling together to accomplish what I believe are the essentials for a successful marriage. I say that our focus is not centered on the substance of what we talk about—whether that involves finances, child rearing, sex or any other area of conflict. What we concentrate on is process. What I try to do with each couple is to verify that the following exists or to teach them how to gain these skills. They are:

1. An effective communication system, which is essentially reflective listening.
2. A negotiating system that they both think is fair.
3. Consequently this results in a feeling in both parties that the relationship is equitable.
4. Good will is created in the process resulting in both parties feeling that their mate understands their needs and puts effort in to trying to legitimize those needs thus resulting in both parties feeling an indebtedness to their mates. I think this mutual indebtedness is a cornerstone of love.

This is the model, we spend the remaining sessions with me teaching the skills that are not mastered and praising them in areas where the skills are already exhibited. Please contact me if you wish to discuss anything in this article.

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