The Marriage Meeting Program: A Strength Based Approach for Successful Relationships

Introduction

Statistics about failed marriages are alarming: about 50% of first marriages, 60% of second marriages and 70% of third marriages end in divorce.

- The apparent marriage crisis reflects huge societal shifts, which have bred new and often unconscious expectations for marriage. Consequently, people tend to lack clarity about why they are marrying and what they hope to gain from the union. When the marriage falters, they tend to blame their spouse, or they say that the institution of marriage is obsolete.

Is marriage outdated, or is it evolving? Until about seventy years ago, most women needed marriage for financial security and social status. Marriage was their main career option. Cohabitation, divorce, and remaining single were stigmatized. All this has changed.

Today most women hold jobs, and about one third of them out-earn their husbands. It’s become increasingly acceptable in most circles for singles to raise children on their own or with a cohabiting partner. Clearly, the rules have changed. The old reasons for marrying, by and large, no longer apply.

But marriage is not passé. It is changing into something better than ever for people who know how to create a collaborative, egalitarian union that fulfills them emotionally and spiritually, as well as physically and materially. Current divorce rates indicate that most couples lack the knowledge for creating such a relationship.

Couples can create a more satisfying marriage by learning how, assuming that they are basically compatible in the first place. Chemistry counts, but other important factors include
intellectual compatibility; shared goals, lifestyle preferences, and values; enough similar interests, and good character traits.

An effective way for today’s busy couples to stay connected is to hold a weekly marriage meeting for just the two of them. A marriage meeting is a gentle, respectful conversation held in accordance with clear guidelines, positive communication skills and a simple, loosely structured agenda. The meeting has four parts: (1) Appreciation, (2) Chores, (3) Planning for Good Times, and (4) Problems and Challenges.

**Are Marriage Meetings Unromantic?**

The idea of a formal meeting sounds unromantic to some people. Actually, effective marriage meetings foster more romance, intimacy, and teamwork. When issues get resolved regularly and respectfully, trust and collaboration increase.

Marriage meetings prevent grievances from accumulating, because they provide a forum where they get addressed promptly. Grudge holding creates distance and destroys romance.

Any two people who live under the same roof can benefit from using the marriage meeting format. Some (nonromantic) roommates use this structure for “roommate meetings.” Marriage meeting techniques can be applied effectively in other settings too, such as for staff or board members of nonprofit agencies, businesses, and other organizations.

**Marriage Meetings are Proactive**

Some couples object to the idea of a formal meeting. The trade-off is worth it; without an ongoing system for addressing the details of life together that need attention, it is easy to ignore them until a crisis develops.

Marriage meetings are proactive because they address small matters before they grow into crises. It’s easy for couples to let things slide by waiting for a concern to surface and then
talking about it spontaneously. But that spontaneous time for one partner often happens when the other is not in the mood for a calm discussion about a sensitive matter. If one does bring up a sensitive matter when the partner’s mind is elsewhere, the latter might feel annoyed at being distracted or intruded on. On the other hand, a partner might wait for the “right time” to talk about a sensitive matter, but the right time never seems to come — until anger mounts to the point that it gets unleashed in a way that hurts their relationship.

**Marriage Meetings Restore Connection**

It’s easy for couples to take each other for granted, to forget to express appreciation or plan for dates together. Chores can pile up or get mishandled.

By scheduling times for marriage meetings, spouses reconnect and feel valued by each other every week. After meeting for a while, the meeting’s benefits extend to everyday interactions. Partners notice what they like about each other more often. They start complimenting each other using positive communication skills routinely.

Often people explain their unhappy or failed marriage by saying, “We just grew apart.” Couples do not grow apart; they drift away because they stop making time to connect with each other. Marriage meetings provide a weekly wake-up call for staying connected emotionally, intellectually, physically, and spiritually.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- Understand the value of helping clients create more fulfilling marriages.
- Recognize how societal changes bred new spousal expectations.
- Learn the benefits, structure, guidelines, and techniques for effective Marriage Meetings.
- Be able to explain to clients how to conduct each of the four parts of the Marriage Meeting agenda.
• Foster clients’ use of positive communication skills that contribute to successful Marriage Meetings and to better relating in general.

• Learn how to use the Marriage Meeting to diagnose issues to address in psychotherapy.

• Use psycho-educational and process/collaborative couple therapy approaches with clients, regardless of whether or not they’re holding marriage meetings.

• Learn to facilitate a workshop in which couples role play all four parts of marriage meeting with leader assisting and coaching.

• Understand why the marriage meeting tool is consistent with cognitive behavioral, psychodynamic, emotionally focused therapy (EFT), and other therapy models.

• Recognize that marriage meetings are consistent with self-help programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, and others.

THE HIGH COST OF FAILED MARRIAGES

Children from failed or unhappy marriages are generally at a disadvantage regarding succeeding in marriage as adults. *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, by Dr. Judith Wallerstein, Julia Lewis and Sandra Blakeslee, is America's only longitudinal study of divorce is profoundly disturbing and shatters major myths about divorce. The research cited in this book documents difficulties children of divorce experience in succeeding in marriage.

According to psychologist John Gottman’s research cited in *The Relationship Cure*, being unhappily married:

• can raise your chance of getting sick by more than 35%.

• can shorten your life by an average of four years.

Children raised in homes with a high level of marital hostility:
• have chronically high levels of stress hormones.
• more bouts of infectious diseases like colds, flu.
• have far higher rates of social and psychological difficulties.

Gottman also cites studies that confirm benefits of marrying: longevity, health, happiness, and overall well-being.

THE CHANGING PICTURE OF MARRIAGE

Until recent decades:
• Divorce was unusual.
• Divorced people were stigmatized.
• Marriage was a financial necessity for most women.
• Marriage was considered necessary for people who wanted a steady sexual or relationship partner and children.

The factors that fostered stable marriages in the recent past no longer exist.
• Women have become educated and can support themselves financially.
• There is no longer a societal expectation that sexual relationships and cohabitation should occur only between married people.
• Divorce is no longer stigmatized the way it used to be.
• Single parenthood has become acceptable.
• Women can be employed in virtually any field.
• Many wives earn more income than their partner.

WHY GET MARRIED?

Maslow’s conceived a hierarchy of needs. He recognized that once people’s more basic needs are satisfied they long to satisfy “higher” (social, psychological, and spiritual) needs.
Marriage used to be needed to satisfy the four lowest levels on Maslow’s hierarchy, shown on the above chart. Today men and women can meet these lower needs while staying single. The highest level, self-actualization is what people achieve in a marriage that fulfils them emotionally and spiritually, as well as physically and materially.

A good 21st Century marriage fosters self-actualization. If encourages personal growth and fulfillment of both partners. Partners feel loved, lovable, and cared for, and they love and care for each other in a stable relationship over time.

Marriage meetings help couples create and maintain a satisfying relationship by providing these benefits:

• The proactive approach prevents crises from developing.
• The meetings gain closure about lingering matters, so they prevent grudges.
• The meeting’s ground rules foster respect and courtesy.
• The meetings level the playing field for less verbal partner.
• They encourage collaboration.
• They fosters love, teamwork, and romance.
• They increase smoother resolution of conflicts.

Follow-up studies confirm that couples who learned to hold marriage meetings at a workshop and continued to hold the meetings on their own gained a significant increase in marital happiness. Some couples met less frequently than weekly. About half of the couples who learned the process continued to hold marriage meetings on their own. Most couples who did not hold meetings after attending a workshop had relationship issues that needed to be addressed in order to improve communication, such as with individual or couple therapy or counseling.

HOW MARRIAGE MEETINGS DIFFER FROM COUPLE THERAPY
Marriage Meetings are best for couples who are already functioning well enough to hold effective meetings on their own. They take responsibility for how they communicate, are willing to learn, and are open to growing personally. Couples with these traits can learn how to hold a marriage meeting in an educational workshop led by a therapist, during a therapy session, or by reading the book, Marriage Meetings for Lasting Love: 30 Minutes a Week to the Relationship You’ve Always wanted.

THE STRUCTURE OF A MARRIAGE MEETING WORKSHOP
The workshop should be in two sessions, one week apart. Each session lasts two hours. The first session covers guidelines, the agenda, and positive communication skills for marriage meetings.
Participants get to role-play each part of the marriage meeting. Couples are instructed to hold a marriage meeting on their own before the second workshop session.

The second session begins with participants reporting on how their meeting went. It includes trouble shooting about areas people may have found difficult, reviewing and clarifying guidelines and communication skills. Role-playing can also be useful during this session to practice applying and integrating concepts. The leader (therapist) should feel free to step in by role-playing with participants when useful to demonstrate a point or concept.

A detailed agenda for a marriage meeting workshop is provided in the latter part of this class.

**MARRIAGE MEETINGS DURING COUPLE THERAPY SESSIONS**

Many couple therapy clients can hold the meetings independently once the therapist has guided them through the process during one or a few sessions. Others will need coaching for a longer time during which the therapist keeps them on track. It can take much practice and reminders in order to help couples transform longstanding dysfunctional communication patterns into positive ones.

The therapist can bring insight-oriented therapy into the process. Clients can experience “aha!” moments when they recognize how they learned from parental role models to communicating negatively or to tolerate a partner’s destructive style of relating.

It’s helpful to empathize with clients around their struggle to change. They may feel like they are being disloyal to a parent if they abandon his or her teachings. It can also feel frightening to be vulnerable with one’s partner, if they’ve spent many years in a defensive mode instead of expressing their true feelings, thoughts, wants and needs. Encourage clients to stay the
course, because it takes much courage and practice to replace harmful communication patterns with constructive ones that foster a more satisfying connection.

Most couples who seek professional help have complex, longstanding issues that require intensive couple or individual therapy. A therapist who attempts to coach them through a marriage meetings will need to intervene frequently to help them express straightforward appreciation instead of giving backhanded compliments to each other, to change complaints into wishes, and to remind them to stick to the agenda and to address one issue at a time instead of randomly bringing up a different concern before completing the discussion of the initial or prior one.

TECHNIQUES FOR MEETINGS: TIME, PLACE, ETIQUETTE GUIDELINES

It’s useful to acquaint clients with these guidelines for holding effective marriage meetings:

• Schedule the meeting at a time when partners are alert, calm, and sober.
• Do not meet when hungry, tired, angry or while eating.
• Choose a private location where interruptions are unlikely.
• Use positive communication skills; be polite and respectful.
• Bring a smartphone, appointment book or other system to record agreement details.
• Follow the order of prescribed agenda.
• Take notes.
• Be flexible about who initiates the meeting.
• Limit meeting to a maximum of 45 minutes.

It’s best usually for the less verbal partner be the “leader” of the meeting so that he or she will gain a sense of ownership and commitment to the process. This means that this person is the one who states each agenda topic and initiates the discussions. For example, if the husband
is the less verbal one of the two, he would be the one who expresses appreciation. He announces each topic and gets to speak first about it.

Exceptions are possible, such as in the case of a couple in therapy who agreed that it made sense for each of them to initiate different parts of their marriage meeting because each was less verbal than the other concerning two of the agenda topics. This particular couple was shown in an early session how to hold a marriage meeting. They were quickly able to hold a weekly meeting successfully in between therapy sessions. This husband and wife are actively involved in Alcoholics Anonymous and Alanon, respectively, in were they’ve been learning to accept responsibility for their words and actions, and to express themselves thoughtfully. They used therapy sessions to refine their communication, become more comfortable being vulnerable with each other, and deal with sensitive situations in the safe environment of the therapy office.

Most couples who come to therapy will need to be coached through several marriage meetings before they will be able to hold them successfully on their own. A backlog of complaints easily becomes expressed in blaming and defensive interchanges. A therapist can help them to complaints into wishes, teach then positive communication skills, and gives them the opportunity practice communicating positively, responsibly and respectfully.

It is normal for couples to hold several marriage meetings before the process begins to feel natural. The artificial structure can feel stilted because it’s not how they are used to talking to each other. The therapist can tell them that following the agenda may feel awkward at first. It’s useful to remind them of the benefits likely to result from expressing appreciation, coordinating tasks, having weekly dates, and resolving issues or misunderstandings promptly.
Some spouses complain that they always have to remind their partner when it’s time to meet. The therapist can say, “Don’t stand on ceremony,” Reassure the person that it doesn’t matter who initiates their meetings. The main thing is that they should continue to conduct them regularly.

Some couples hold their marriage meeting the same day each week; others vary the day if their schedules change from week to week. Either way is fine, as long as they continue to make sure that the meetings are held.

THE MARRIAGE MEETING PROCESS

1. Schedule marriage meetings. Couple agrees on date and time to meet. They may decide in advance what topic(s) to cover.

2. Initiate, hold meeting. Take notes. Schedule the next meeting, if meeting is not to occur on same day of the week and at same time regularly.

3. Implement Plans.

THE MARRIAGE MEETING AGENDA

The meeting’s agenda has four parts, to be conducted in this sequence:

1. Appreciation

2. Chores/Responsibilities

3. Planning for Good Times

4. Problems and Challenges

This sequence is important. Expressing and receiving Appreciation feels good and sets a positive tone for the rest of the meeting. Consequently, the couple will feel willing to hold the next part of the meeting, Chores, effectively. The next topic, Planning for Good Times, likewise fosters a positive, collaborate tone. Couples then look forward to implementing their plan(s), which makes
them more likely to conduct the last part of the meeting, *Problems and Challenges*, collaboratively and respectfully.

If couples prefer to use different names from the above ones for each agenda topic, that’s fine as long as they refer to the same topics. For example, a husband told me that he’d rather call the last agenda topic *Situations* instead of Problems and Challenges because *Situations* sounded more manageable to him. Some people might rather call the second part of the meeting *Tasks* instead of Chores or Responsibilities.

**HOW TO HOLD EACH PART OF A MARRIAGE MEETING**

**Agenda Topic #1: APPRECIATION.**

Appreciation is a universal need. Mother Teresa said, *“There is more hunger for love and appreciation in this world than for bread.”*

During *Appreciation*, the first part of marriage meeting, each partner takes an uninterrupted turn to say what they liked about their spouse during the past week, using I-Statements, e.g., “I appreciate how you caught my eye and smiled at me when we were at Sue’s place Tuesday night,” or “I liked how helpful you were backing me up yesterday when I told Henry to finish his homework before dinner.” It’s especially effective to the listener to get complimented for good character traits and to hear specifics, such as when or where the valued behavior occurred. For example, “I appreciate you for your *kindness* in visiting my sick aunt with me last Tuesday evening.” As one husband in a marriage meeting workshop said, “It helps when she’s specific. I don’t know why, but it helps!” he said, smiling broadly.

Compliments about appearance are important too, e.g. “I like how handsome you look in the blue shirt you’re wearing. It brings out the color of your eyes.”
Because most couples come to therapy with a backload of complaints, tell them that their appreciative compliments are to be totally positive. They should not give backhanded compliments like “I appreciate it that you *finally* took out the garbage.”

Here’s how to hold the *Appreciation* part of a marriage meeting, step by step:

1. First speaker tells listening partner five or more things he or she appreciated about the other during the past week while the listener remains silent. The therapist encourages the speaker to:
   A. use I-statements;
   B. be specific;
   C. give only compliments;
   D. compliment character traits along with behaviors.

2. When finished the first speaker should ask, “Did I forget to mention anything?”

3. The listener either says yes and elaborates, or says no.

4. If listener says something like, “Did you appreciate me for making waffles for brunch last Sunday? The speaker says, “Yes, I do appreciate you for making those delicious waffles that you topped with strawberries and whipped cream.” (The speaker has embellished the appreciation by adding details).

5. Listener thanks speaker.

6. Reverse roles.

It’s useful to remind spouses how easy it is to take each other for granted, to forget to express appreciation. Yet if they want their partner to behave in a certain way, the best thing they can do is to tell him or her how much you like it when they do it, *because behaviors that get rewarded get repeated*, Teachers know this when it comes to educating children.
**When Appreciating Is Difficult**

Some people find it difficult to say what they appreciate about their partner because they’ve been taking their partner’s good behaviors and fine character traits for granted for so long. The therapist can help them get into an appreciative mindset in a couple of ways. She might ask the wife, “Did you like how the blue shirt your husband is wearing today matches his blue eyes?” When she says yes, the therapist says, “Tell him.” Couples can be encouraged to appreciate each other for caring enough about their relationship to come to therapy or to learn out how hold a marriage meeting. They can be encouraged to thank their partner for contributing to the family income, doing a chore, or for an act of kindness.

Another challenge arises for people who are uncomfortable accepting compliments. Cultural factors come into play too. Amy Tan’s bestselling novel, *The Joy Luck Club* shows a typical Chinese women responding to a compliment. When a guest raves about her homemade soup, she responds by saying it has too much salt.

Some people grew up in families where complimenting was rare or nonexistent. Accepting a compliment might have been viewed as boasting. Such clients and their partners can benefit from the recognition of cultural influences that may affect their comfort level with holding the Appreciation part of a marriage meeting. So it’s especially important for the therapist to be patient and supportive while guiding them through this part of the meeting. It takes time and perseverance to change a longstanding habit of any kind.

Many people find it useful to make notes in advance of their marriage meeting, including about what they’ve appreciated about their partner. By doing this and consulting their notes during their marriage meeting, they avoid appearing as though they are wracking their brain to
come up with what they’ve like about their partner recently, which doesn’t feel good to the partner who’s expecting to receive heartwarming appreciative comments.

**Case example regarding Appreciation**

Even teachers may not think to apply the concept of rewarding behaviors that they want to see more of, when it comes to their own marriage. A couple in their late sixties who came for therapy were both teachers. The wife, Aline, complained that her husband wasn’t interested in sex or physical intimacy, although a physical issue had been ruled out by his physician. Aline had trouble understanding that although it hurt her terribly when Fred stonewalled her, this was his way of protecting himself when he felt overwhelmed by her the critical and contemptuous remarks.

Fred was responsible and reliable. He had a great sense of humor. He was handy around the house too, possessing plumbing and electrical skills. He gave her gifts for the special occasions.

Aline aired one complaint after another about Fred during early couple therapy sessions: “He doesn’t like my friends.” “He doesn’t initiate going places with me. I’m always the one who has to do this.” “He watches too much television.” The therapist suggested that as a teacher, she probably knew the value of positive reinforcement. Yes, she said; “I used it all the time with my class of third graders.” Yet she took her husband’s fine traits for granted and rarely complimented him.

Early in the therapy, Aline usually came in angry at Fred, who felt frustrated, like nothing he did pleased her. Much of the therapy focused on encouraging both to allow themselves be emotionally vulnerable enough to turn a complaint into a wish and to give compliments to each other regularly. Although they weren’t ready to hold marriage meetings on their own, the
therapist coached them through one during a session. After holding the Appreciation part of the meeting, both of them glowed, which often happens when spouses hear each other’s heartfelt compliments. After they finished their in-office marriage meeting demo, Fred said, “I can see the value of doing this.” Both agreed to give each other at least one compliment daily.

Of course, it’s not so simple to reverse a long established behavior pattern. Therapy helped them recognized how both were repeating patterns they grew up with. Her critical mother was her role model. Consequently, the client was continuing to repeat this familiar interactional pattern.

Like many couples in therapy, in their adult intimate relationship, both of these spouses were acting out a dysfunctional way of relating that they learned in their families of origin. They experienced these destructive ways of communication as strangely comforting because of their familiarity. Fred said that his father was very critical of him as a child. He learned back then to withdraw when feeling attacked, a pattern he continued to demonstrate. Instead of confronting his wife when she verbally attacked him, he’d walk away. She felt rejected by him, although the reality was that he felt overwhelmed and powerless, which the therapist help him recognize. Although they agreed about the cause of their damaging communication pattern, both found it challenging to relate more constructively.

Most sessions focused on establishing a safe climate for practicing new behaviors. The therapist sometimes guided them through the Appreciation part of a marriage meeting, even though the sessions usually were more in the realm of traditional couple therapy without the marriage meeting format. The therapist helped them to change backhanded compliments, like, “I appreciate you for being kind to my aunt for a change on Monday by asking her how her day
went,” to simply, “I appreciate you for being kind to my aunt on Monday by asking her how her day went.”

When Aline and Fred gave each other daily compliments during the week, and when they added hugs to their daily routines, they told the therapist, “We had a good week.” Gradually, and with the sort of backsliding that is typical when trying to change a long established negative pattern, this couple learned that “you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.”

**The Value of Appreciation Cannot Be Overstated**

The Appreciation part of a marriage meeting creates positive feelings at the moment and also an upward spiral of warm emotions. Partners become more alert to noticing what they like about each other because they are expected to mention at least five things they’ve valued about their partner during the past week. As they continue to hold marriage meetings, their fondness and acceptance of each other, warts and all, grows because their focus has shifted from what’s lacking to what they value. Once they get used to focusing on what they enjoy about each other, they’re likely to give each other compliments any time, not only during their marriage meetings. The meetings help couples re-connect not only once a week, but in an ongoing way.

**Agenda Topic #2: CHORES/RESPONSIBILITIES**

“*After enlightenment, the laundry.*” — Josh Billings

This is the business part of the meeting. Each partner brings in a to-do list, from which they choose one or two tasks that they’d like to have handled, usually during the coming week. Together, they agree on who will take care of what and when.

The taking on of tasks should be voluntary. If the therapist observes that one person seems to be telling the other what to do, this is an opportunity to teach both partners how to
collaborate and negotiate respectfully. If a chore wasn’t completed in a timely manner, instead of reminding or nagging one’s partner, the subject can be raised and the timeline reset during the couple’s next marriage meeting. This part of the meeting should go smoothly and fairly quickly. If the discussion becomes complicated or emotional, the topic should be moved to the last part of the meeting: Problems and Challenges.

Here are the main things to accomplish in the *Chores* part of a marriage meeting:

- Either partner mentions jobs on their to-do list.
- Either partner offers to handle one or more tasks and says when they’ll get done.
- Progress reports are offered or requested.
- Priorities and timelines are set or reset.
- The tone should be businesslike and collaborative.
- If the tone becomes emotional, move the topic to Part 4 of Marriage Meeting:
  Problems and Challenges.

Encourage couples to collaborate and to take on responsibilities voluntarily. Many spouses have developed a pattern of issuing orders to a spouse, as in, “You need to call a plumber.” Help them shift from such “parent-child” interactions to adult-adult ones, by guiding them to state what needs attention, needed, e.g., “The drain in the bathtub is clogged.” If no one volunteers to get it fixed, you can instruct one spouse to say to the other, “Would you be willing to call a plumber tomorrow, or would you rather I do it? Or you might suggest that one partner politely request that the other handle a chore, by asking politely, "Would you please call the plumber today or tomorrow?"

Such approaches may seem obvious to people whose relationship is already collaborative and egalitarian. Yet, it’s quite common for many spouses to either give orders that result in
resentment and passive-aggressive responses (“I forgot to do it.”) and a consequent waning of emotional and physical intimacy, or to say nothing and expect their mate to read their mind and then feel resentful when that doesn’t happen.

**Agenda Topic #3: PLANNING FOR GOOD TIMES**

During this part of a marriage meeting, the couple schedules a date for just the two of them. Many couples who come for therapy have heard that it’s a good idea for spouses to schedule a weekly date but can’t remember the last time they did this. The therapist can help them remember the good times they used to have during their courtship phase. She should remind them that their date is not the time to hold a marriage meeting; it’s a time to have fun and daydream out loud.

Partners are also encouraged to make plans for themselves individually that reenergize themselves, such as Julia Cameron recommends in her book, *The Artist’s Way*. Plans for getting together with friends or family members, and vacation plans are likewise appropriate to discuss during this part of the meeting. Again, if the conversation becomes emotional or argumentative, move the sensitive topic to the last part of the meeting: Problems and Challenges.

Here’s how to hold the *Planning for Good Times* part of a marriage meeting, step by step:

**Couple plans:**

- Weekly dates for just the two of them
- Enjoyable activities to do individually
- Family outings
- Socializing with friends
- Vacations
If a couple finds it difficult to agree on a plan:

- brainstorm for solutions (explained below);
- ask them to remember activities they enjoyed in the past;
- Suggest to partners who have gotten rusty in the fun department that each make a list.

The list of enjoyable activities partners make can simply state each event or include more information to help them move toward implementation. The chart below asks them to fill in the blanks to note when they last did each activity on their list, whether it can be done alone or with a partner, and whether it’s free or costs money. Finally, they make their action plan by scheduling when they’ll do their preferred activities.

If they want ideas for activities, they can do an internet search for lists of pleasurable activities and find hundreds to choose from to include in their list.

A chart to help plan good times can look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>When?</th>
<th>A or P*</th>
<th>$ or Free</th>
<th>Action Plan</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kayaking</td>
<td>a month ago</td>
<td>A, P</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>Go Sunday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hiking</td>
<td>don’t remember</td>
<td>A, P</td>
<td>Free</td>
<td>Set date with spouse.</td>
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<tr>
<td>read novel</td>
<td>2 months ago</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Free</td>
<td>Go to library Friday</td>
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(Etcetera, listing 10 activities)

* A or P stands for whether the activity is done Alone or with another Person.
**Agenda Topic #4: PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES**

Couples are advised to start this part of their marriage meeting with a light concern during early meetings and to make sure to use positive communication skills, described below. An easy-to-resolve challenge, for example, can be when one partner is trying to lose weight and asks the other to help, such as by either not bringing home the tempting junk food or by hiding it. Once the couple gains confidence in holding effective marriage meetings, they can introduce more challenging topics, like in-law issues, money, sex, and parenting concerns. The goal of the first meeting is for both partners to have a positive experience and to want to schedule a second meeting, the second meeting should feel good enough for both to want to schedule the next meeting, and so on.

Here’s how the therapist, as role model, facilitator, or instructor, tells couple how to hold the *Problems and Challenges* part of a marriage meeting, step by step:

- Tell couple: “Start with an easy problem or challenge.”
- Guide clients to reframe a complaint into a request.
- Teach positive communication skills.
- Encourage discussion of one issue at a time.
- Advise couples to limit discussion to one or two challenges per meeting.
- Actively direct clients to follow the agenda. Help them to keep the meeting on track.
- “Double” (speak for one or both partners and make sure you’ve expressed what they want to say by checking with then) to model constructive communication, with clients’ permission.
- If doubling, ask client: “Is this what you want to say?”
• If issues are too complex to deal with via the marriage meeting format, explain to clients that it may be better to delay marriage meeting coaching to a time when they’ve improved their relationship through a standard type of couple or individual therapy.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR MARRIAGE MEETINGS
These skills are presented as needed to couples during their private session. In therapy sessions and in workshops, many people find it helpful to see these skills explained step by step on a separate chart for each one.

Positive communication skills foster successful Marriage Meetings and better relating at other times. In a workshop, the therapist or workshop leader identifies, explains and demonstrates how to use these techniques, observes how partners use them, and compliments them for using them effectively or coaches them to use them successfully.

• I-Statements
• Congruent Communication
• Nonverbal Communication
• Self-Talk
• Active Listening
• Giving Constructive Feedback
• Brainstorming for Solutions

I-STATEMENTS
At the heart of couple therapy, is the process of changing partner’s way of dealing with differences from using blaming type You-Statements to I-Statements, which often means directing to turn a complaint into a wish. Couples often need much encouragement and support to practice this process of changing a longstanding habit. For many of them, it feels much safer
to tell a partner, “You’re a slob” or “You embarrass me” or to say something that implies that the other is wrong, stupid, or otherwise deficient than to own and express their true feelings, wants, and needs. The therapist can explain that I-statements foster closeness and connection and that You-Statements foster distance and defensive responses, like, “Oh yeah, you think I’m a slob. What about how you always leave your papers all over the kitchen table?”

Showing people a chart like this serve as reminder to use I-Statements and to normalize their use for those who may have learned long ago that it wasn’t safe to express their true selves:

**EXAMPLES OF I-STATEMENTS**

- I appreciate __________________;
- I like __________________;
- I want; I’d rather not __________________;
- I feel (happy, hurt, anxious, resentful, grateful, sad, etc.) when you ____________________________ (action word or phrase)
  because ____________________________.
  (effect the action or event had on you)
- What I would like instead is ____________________________.

* A good I-Statement is free from expectations. It is a clear statement of how it is from your side and how you would like it to be.
CONGRUENT COMMUNICATION

The therapist, or workshop leader can explain congruent communication with the aid of the chart that lists congruent and other styles of communicating, as explained by family therapy founder, Virginia Satir: Congruent; Blaming; Placating; Reasonable; and Irrelevant:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIVE WAYS PEOPLE COMMUNICATE WHEN DISAGREEMENT EXISTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Congruent</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blaming</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Placating</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reasonable</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Irrelevant</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nonverbal Communication

Many of us think that the words we say determine the bulk of the message people receive from us. However, studies by Albert Mehrabian, PhD, and colleagues confirm the truth of the familiar saying, “It’s not what you say; it’s how you say it.” Here is what the study found regarding how much of the message received by the listener is based on the sender’s words, voice, and body language when people are communicating about their feelings and attitudes:

Most people are likely to be surprised when they learn how little their actual words convey compared to what’s received from their body language and tone of voice. Listing these percentages on a chart like this one adds impact:

**What a Relationship Partner Hears**

1. Verbal communication consists of the spoken words. 7%
2. Nonverbal communication: gestures, facial expressions, body language. 55%
3. Voice tone. 38%

These percentages are based on a study that demonstrated that it is not so much what we say in words as how we express ourselves nonverbally that determines the message the listener receives.

Self-Talk

Self-talk refers to the messages we say to ourselves. **This five-step method proposed by psychologist Pamela Butler, PhD, author of Talking to Yourself: How Cognitive Behavior Therapy Can Change Your Life** offers a way to change destructive messages we give ourselves into supportive ones:

**Step 1. Be aware.** Listen to your own self-talk.

**Step 2. Evaluate.** Decide if your inner dialogue is supportive or destructive.
Step 3. Identify. Determine the source of the cognitive distortion or thinking error that is maintaining your inner speech. Is it

- the Driver, an inner self who commands you to be perfect, hurry up, be strong, please others, or try hard;
- the Stopper, an inner self who catastrophizes, self-labels, self-judges in negative ways, and sets rigid requirements; or
- the Confuser, an inner self who makes arbitrary inferences, fails to be aware of the full picture, overgeneralizes, and makes other cognitive distortions?

Step 4. Support yourself. Replace your negative self-talk with permission and self-affirmation. For example, if you are inclined to please others too often at your own expense, you can replace negative self-talk with permission by saying to yourself, “At times it is important for me to do or say what I want, even if my doing so does not please my partner at the moment.”

Step 5. Develop your guide. Decide what action you need to take, based on your new supportive position.

Example of How to Use Self-Talk:

Kaitlin feels resentful toward Brandon for being too lax when it comes to disciplining their fourteen-year-old son, Dillon. She goes through the five steps listed above:

tells herself:

1. What am I telling myself? “I’m telling myself that my husband is a wimp. He’s a bad parent because he wants to be a pal instead of a father to our son.”

2. Is my self-talk helping? “No, it is not, because it’s making me resent my husband and view him as inferior.”
3. *Is the Driver, Stopper, or Confuser operating?* "My Confuser is causing me to fail to be aware of the full picture."

4. *What permission and self-affirmation will I give myself?* "I give myself permission to be aware of the full picture: My husband is less assertive and more easygoing than I am. Most of the time I appreciate his relaxed nature and quiet strength. Sometimes I’m too strict or rigid. Neither of us is perfect.

5. *What action will I take based on my new supportive position?* "I’ll remember to appreciate having a husband who’s an even-tempered, loving, kind husband and father. I’ll accept that our differences around parenting can be challenging. I’ll focus on accepting how Brandon’s style of disciplining our son differs from mine, and on accepting that in some situations his approach makes more sense than mine. I’ll encourage him to hold a firmer line when I feel it’s needed, but ultimately, I will accept that I cannot change his nature.

This example shows the effectiveness of communicating with oneself. It was more constructive for this wife to recognize and transform her self-talk into a more supportive message than to criticize her husband for being weak. By applying the five steps of self-talk, spouses can catch themselves making negative assumptions about their partner that may not be correct. If a spouse skips the five-step process, it is easy to jump from an unhelpful thought to resentment, self-pity, or other destructive behaviors that are based on a false interpretation their partner's behavior.

**Active Listening: The Six Steps**²

Active listening involves more than just lending an ear to your partner. It requires complete concentration. The six steps of active listening are:
1. Stop what you are doing. Take the necessary time out to really listen to your partner.

2. Look at your partner. Making eye contact tells that you are ready to listen. Body language and facial expression also indicate an interest in listening. Make sure these nonverbal signals we send reflect a willingness to listen. Focus on your partner. Try to push everything else from your mind.

3. Listen to your partner. Listen without interrupting, arguing, or giving advice. Just Listen. If you have an emotional response, notice this while staying silent and slowly breathing in and out, perhaps closing your eyes to center yourself.

4. Rephrase or repeat what your partner says. This step encourages us to be good listeners. It also helps us to understand the other person’s meaning and feelings. Rephrasing also helps the partner to recognize and clarify her or his emotional feelings.

5. Always check out with your partner whether your interpretation of what was communicated is accurate. The speaker should clarify his or her meaning if the partner’s interpretation seems inaccurate, after which step #4 should be repeated.

6. Be empathic. Seek to understand your spouse’s emotions in the situation she or he is describing. Try to put yourself in your spouse’s position. Save your advice for another time.

Explain that some people are afraid that if they are empathic they’ll have to give in to what their partner wants. It is important to recognize that what we all want most is to feel understood.

**Constructive Criticism and Feedback**
Constructive criticism occurs in a context of support and appreciation. It helps us to improve ourselves and grow. Its opposite, destructive criticism, feels like faultfinding and finger-pointing and typically results in a defensive response. In each situation, notice the positive features. We all want to be appreciated for what we are doing well. Here is how to sugarcoat the pill that might otherwise taste bitter:

1. Before offering your comments, observations, or suggestions, ask your partner whether she or he is willing to receive them. If your spouse shows no interest in accepting your offer, do not continue the discussion. If your partner says yes, go to step 2.

2. When you give constructive feedback, use the “sandwich” approach — along with I-statements — by arranging your comments in the following order:
   
   a. First, say something positive. State at least one thing you appreciate about your partner. For example, “I like the way you give me a warm hug when you arrive home from work.”
   
   b. Next, state your concern about what your partner did or didn’t do that caused you to feel upset or uncomfortable. Using the example given here, you might say, “I don’t like it when you read the mail before you give me a hello hug.”
   
   c. Describe what you would like to have happen instead, such as by saying, “I would like us to hug when you get home before you get involved in anything else.”
   
   d. Finally, say something else that is complimentary about your partner. You might say, “Hugging you is one of the highlights of my day.”

3. If you are the receiver of the criticism, follow the instructions for active listening.³

**Brainstorming for Solutions**
Couples who come for therapy often present situations in which each has a fixed idea about how things should go, whether about money, parenting, sex, recreation, or something else.

Brainstorming for solutions often unlocks the locked horns. This process can resolve lingering disagreements and foster win-win solutions that take into consideration the viewpoints of both partners. When faced with a challenge, it’s common for people to want to act on the first idea that comes to mind, but often a better solution emerges after a number of alternatives are considered.

Corporations often use a more structured brainstorming process in order to make good decisions for their companies. This method also works beautifully for couples seeking to resolve differences in a way that satisfies both of them and therefore benefits their relationship.

**First Listen Actively**

To create an optimal climate for brainstorming, encourage clients to strive to respect differences in a positive spirit. Make sure that you understand each other’s viewpoint on the issue that they find challenging. Sometimes it’s hard to do this. Each person is often so attached to their own opinion that they have no room to take in their partner’s reasoning. By carefully using the active listening technique, they can start accepting differences.

**HOW TO BRAINSTORM FOR SOLUTIONS**

1. Write down issue in a way that respects both partners

2. Solicit suggestions, out of the box thinking, no judging.

3. List each idea on a whiteboard or on paper.
4. Partners look over completed list with an open mind.

5. Ask partners whether first suggestion is worth considering.

6. If either partner vetoes it, cross it out.

7. Repeat the process, going down the list.

8. After finishing above, partners assess pros and cons of each idea that remains on list.

9. Partners instructed to rank order the possibilities.

10. Circle the idea(s) couple decides to implement

About the first step, writing down the issue in a way that respects both partners initial position as valid, here’s a way to do this: Frame the challenge as something like, “How can this couple (or Jack and Mary) live in harmony when one wants ____________ and the other wants ____________.” This objective way of looking at the issue helps get couples off the “I’m right; he’s wrong” framework with which tends to keep them stuck in tug of war style win-lose interactions. Brainstorming, when done as described above, virtually always results in win-win type solutions that satisfy both partners.

Therapists can help couples learn to define the issue by offering one or more suggestions about how to do so until the couple choose the on that fits for them. Many couples who come for therapy find it difficult to define their issue objectively because they’ve become used to blaming their partner for creating or maintaining challenging situations.

MARRIAGE MEETING AS DIAGNOSTIC TOOL

Example: Bill and Kate, unmarried couple, tried Marriage Meetings during some private couple sessions. The process:
• Couple sabotaged Marriage Meetings, played “uproar” game, alternating persecutor (blamer) and victim roles, rarely completing MM agenda.

• Much baiting, name calling, and some storming out of office.

• Therapist provided psycho-education, structure.

• Couple agreed to rules, e.g., no swearing, but often broke them.

• Therapist realized each partner needed to gain empathy for self before he/she would be able to respond empathically to the other.

• Therapist recommended individual therapy for both before resuming Marriage Meeting Program.

• Bill received individual therapy for about 18 months, Kate also received individual therapy. Relationship improved.

HOW MARRIAGE MEETINGS FIT WITH COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL, PSYCHODYNAMIC, AND OTHER THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy:

• Emphasizes setting goals and monitoring progress.

• Emphasizes positive reinforcement to increase frequency of desired behaviors.

• Uses relaxation and desensitization techniques (in accordance with principle of reciprocal inhibition).

• Provides psycho-education to clients.

The Marriage Meeting Program:
• Encourages goal setting, in effect, via teamwork around chores, planning enjoyable activities, and resolving issues.

• MM agenda topic #1, Appreciation, harnesses the power of positive reinforcement.

• Relaxed setting and other guidelines for MM’s promote relaxation.

• Therapist provides psycho-education to clients while explaining how to conduct MM’s, using charts and information sheets.

**Family Systems model** (Virginia Satir) emphasizes:

• noticing the sequence, or process, of behavior between two or more family members.

• that a change in one family member’s behavior affects the behavior of others in the family system.

• that family systems are governed by unspoken rules about how members are to relate; these rules are enforced by a gatekeeper.

• Families seek to maintain homeostasis, or balance; members resist change.

**The Marriage Meeting Program**

• makes it possible for therapist to use marriage meetings to diagnose the sequence and process of the couple’s behavior.

• demonstrates to couples how a change in one partner’s behavior leads to changes in the other’s behavior.

• replaces harmful relationship system’s rules with guidelines for more positive relating.

• advises therapist to acknowledge that it is difficult to change a habit.

**John Gottman’s Marital Therapy Model**

• Gottman’s Research reveals that happy couples have 20:1 ration of positive to negative comments.
• importance of partners responding to each other’s “bids,” which are requests for attention.

• knowing that most marital problems are not resolvable.

The MMP fosters implementation of Gottman’s recommendations:

• meetings occur on a regular basis.

• structure promotes an increase in positive comments (appreciation), mutual attention, solving of solvable problems.

MM’s foster acceptance of differences that partners can live with.

Sue Johnson’s **Emotionally Focused Therapy** model states:

• Couples who have repetitive arguments often are expressing disguised complaints about not feeling loved.

• Such arguments can lead to hurt feelings, withdrawal and other distancing responses.

• How couples can create more attuned, responsive-to-each-other conversations.

The **Marriage Meeting Program** implements Johnson’s recommendations:

• Marriage meetings provide structure for couple to connect regularly in a positive environment.

• Communication skills used in MM’s foster attuned-to-each-other relating during and beyond each meeting.

Harville Hendrix’s **Imago Therapy** model

• States conflicts in marriage are caused by expectation of partner for mate to heal partner’s repressed childhood wounds (e.g., insecure attachment issues), and later disappointment when this doesn’t happen.

• Recommends exercises to foster introspection, relating as equal adults.
The Marriage Meeting Program

• is compatible with insight oriented psychodynamic approaches.
• has structure, guidelines that foster attunement, adult-to-adult relating.
• has benefit of regularity, providing opportunity for partners to integrate insights and overcome obstacles to constructive communication.

Strategic Therapy approaches (Milton Erickson, Jay Haley) emphasize

• reframing, or redefining a problem into something that sounds more positive or instills hopeful attitude.
• setting goals and creating individualized solutions for each situation.

The Marriage Meeting Program

Therapists can help clients to reframe:

• fairytale happy-ever-after myth into “relationships are messy and complicated; let’s get organized.”
• disappointment with partner into appreciation for good intention.
• a problem into a challenge couple can address as a team.
• chores as burdens into opportunities for teamwork.
• dysfunctional behaviors into habits/patterns that people can change.

Marriage Meetings encourage individualized solutions for each challenge.

Twelve-Step programs

• are self-help systems.
• encourage “progress, not perfection.
• Normalize “slips.”
• discourage “stinking thinking” -- co-dependency, perfectionism, black and white thinking, unrealistic expectations of self and others, etc.

The Marriage Meeting Program

• is a self-help method.
• encourages progress, not perfection; prescribes appreciation for effort, regardless of outcome.
• offers positive responses to and normalizes slips (e.g., an undone chore).
• Fosters a “think positive” yet realistic attitude by encouraging collaboration, appropriate expectations of self and others, congruent communication, mutual acceptance and appreciation.

Male/Female Communication Differences

• Deborah Tannen, PhD’s research confirms that females are more verbal and cooperate more. Men are more inclined to compete.
• John Grey, PhD states that women want to talk; men want to retreat to their “cave.”
• Louann Brizendine, author of The Female Brain, states differences in male and female brains explain why women are more verbal and relationship oriented than men.

The Marriage Meeting Program

• helps level playing field. Mars and Venus meet on neutral territory.
• provides structure, guidelines that encourage both sexes to express themselves and hear each other.

Neuroscience/Neurobiology findings:

• Attachment and affect regulation patterns are stored in limbic system.
• States that “regulation” occurs by experiencing something uncomfortable in the presence of another person who helps you to hold the experience (i.e., to tolerate the emotions that arise). (Stan Tatkin, PsyD, MFT)

**The Marriage Meeting Program**

• When therapist serves as secure attachment figure he/she can help client to tolerate uncomfortable affect that arises.

• Clients can learn to internalize trusted therapist’s ability to recognize, accept, and regulate difficult emotions, and decrease reactive responses.

  Therapist models empathic relating.

**Psychodynamic Therapy**

• Transference is taken into account.

• Counter-transference is acknowledged.

**The Marriage Meeting Program**

• Transference and Counter-transference are accepted. Therapists needs to stay aware of and deal constructively with their thoughts and feelings.

• Doing above is crucial for maintaining objectivity, avoiding triangulation and avoiding getting “caught in the system.”

**Multicultural and Lifestyle Considerations**

• Culture, lifestyles, and ethnicity may play a role in how people respond to the Marriage Meeting Program.

• Therapeutic alliance will be strengthened by understanding cultural factors that affect clients’ receptivity to any therapeutic model.

**American culture** values individual autonomy.
Expressed in:

• competition, upward mobility, control over environment.
• task-oriented behaviors.

The Marriage Meeting Program

• Emphasis on task-orientated approach and self-expression fit well with American culture.
• Resistance may arise to lack of “spontaneity” inferred from MM’s formality and regularity.
• Fear of criticism, loss of power may underlie resistance.
• Explaining guidelines, benefits (more intimacy, teamwork, smoother resolution of conflicts), goal orientation can help sell MMP to skeptics.

African American

• culture values collectivity over individuality
• commitment to religious values, church participation.
• flexibility in family roles, egalitarian marriages
• strong kinship bonds, help with childcare, housework, money, etc.
• history of oppression, indignities, affects self-esteem.
• may not trust white therapist, yet values competency over race.

Latino

• culture values family hierarchy with husband as authority figure.
• Wife may exercise the real power indirectly.
• Wife often acts as intermediary between husband and children.

The Marriage Meeting Program.

Therapist is encouraged to:
• show respect to husband as head of family and be alert to real roles.
• recognize that husband may resist implementing MMP, fearing he will lose power in the relationship.
• explain benefits of MMP in terms of goals both partners want to achieve in the relationship.
• describe how to create safe environment for MMs.

LGBT Cultures

• value social recognition and acceptance as family units.
• Gender roles tend to be more variable.
• These relationships are often more egalitarian than heterosexual marriages.

The Marriage Meeting Program

The therapist:

• explains that the MMP benefits all types of couples.
• communicates acceptance.

The Marriage Meeting Program:

• collaborative approach; fits with egalitarian marriage.
• encourages therapist to show sensitivity to difficulties that may arise regarding self-expression.

Asian culture highly values harmony. Characteristics:

• self perceived as ‘us’ in the collective consciousness.
• concerned with others’ opinions and how they will be regarded and received.
• values tradition and continuity.
• self-assertion is not encouraged.
Marriage Meeting Program.

Therapist is encouraged to present MMP as a tool to increase marital and family harmony, and to show sensitivity to cultural differences, such as:

- discomfort with self/assertion.
- resistance to sharing responsibility for routine household tasks.

However, culture is one of many variables that account for an individual’s behavior, so be cautious about applying generalizations.

Case Examples Show Therapist Demonstrating Parts of a Marriage Meeting

Clients can gain communication skills by observing their therapist demonstrate how to use positive communication skills when discussing a sensitive issue during a marriage meeting.

*Case example #1:* A wife wanted to know exactly how much money was owed as a consequence of her husband’s second DUI arrest. She brought this up when the therapist was coaching them for how to hold the Problems and Challenges section of their marriage meeting. Because her tone was accusatory, her husband was evasive in responding.

With their permission, the wife observed the therapist demonstrate via role playing how to ask for information about a touchy topic. The therapist changed chairs with the wife, so as to put herself in the wife’s place facing the husband. Playing the role of the wife, the therapist initiated the same discussion with the husband, with an accepting tone of voice and relaxed body language. The therapist instructed the wife to come near her and whisper in her ear any additional question(s) that she wanted her husband to answer that the therapist might not have asked. “What about the medical expenses,” the wife whispered and the therapist asked the husband this question, again in a neutral tone. Hearing the questions as simply requests for information that would help the couple budget, the husband answered honestly. The wife was able to take in the metaphorical message that you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.
**Case Example 2:** While the couples attending a Marriage Meeting workshop were role-playing the Chores part of the meetings, the therapist/leader noticed Jen telling her husband, Stu, “You have to fix the leaky faucet.” The therapist had already explained the difference between I-Statements and You-Statements. Now she explained for the participants the difference between a command and a request. Jen agreed for the therapist to demonstrate for the group how to make a request rather than a demand regarding a chore done, with the therapist playing Jen and her husband Stu playing himself. The therapist said to Stu, “The faucet is leaking. I’d appreciate it if you’d fix it. Would you be willing to? Stu said yes and looked fine about it. There was a collective gasp from the group on hearing a wish stated as a relaxed, polite request rather than as an order or demand. Obviously, there is a need for many clients to learn how to turn a complaint or a demand into a respectfully expressed request.

Once a therapist becomes familiar enough with the ins and outs of holding marriage meetings, they can introduce the tool in workshops for the public and for therapists. The best way to prepare to teach others about marriage meetings is for the therapist to hold marriage meetings with their significant others, following the instructions presented here or after reading this instructor’s book, *Marriage Meetings for Lasting Love.*

Below is a suggested outline for leading a two-session workshop to teach couples how to conduct a weekly marriage meeting. Two sessions are recommended because participants get to practice holding a marriage meeting on their own between the first and second session. The second session is for feedback, troubleshooting, and review, based largely on requests of participants.

**TWO-SESSION MARRIAGE MEETING WORKSHOP**
NOTES FOR INSTRUCTORS

Below are notes for therapists who are interested in leading marriage meeting workshops for couples and others (as occasionally one partner will come alone). The format can be varied according to the needs of the group and the instructor’s skills and knowledge base.

Session 1 Workshop Format

1. Introductions. Ask: How did you learn about this workshop? Have you tried conducting marriage meetings before tonight? What skills do you hope to gain?

2. Instructor presents biographical information, explains class format, confidentiality and other guidelines.

3. Instructor presents guidelines for class.

Class Guidelines

Clarify ground rules for confidentiality. This is a class taught in a workshop format where everyone learns by participating. In order to respect everyone’s privacy, I will be presenting hypothetical examples of situations for discussion to illustrate concepts. But it is important that we all agree that any personal information that is shared here is to be considered confidential and to remain here, not to be shared with anyone from outside of the class. Ask: Are any questions about confidentiality? Do we all agree to keep what is said by class participants confidential?

Explain that participants will have the opportunity to role play each part of the meeting. Ask whether or not want feedback from the group. Review sheet of information re. Ground rules for offering feedback (observations, opinions, suggestions, etc.). Distribute sheet and have someone read it.
Instructor asks: Do you want coaching from me when I observe your role play or possibly from other participants if you volunteer to role play in front of the group? I assume that most people want feedback, but please let me know if you do not.

Instructors should offer to answer questions people have when all the couples enact each part of a marriage meeting. Participants can signal the instructor, who then comes over to listen to their communication and provide validation or on the spot coaching as needed.

Encourage participants to accept their own and each other’s feelings, wants, and desires as valid. We want to hear each other’s feelings, wants and desires, with no value judgments about whether someone is right or wrong to have a particular feeling, want, or desire.

The instructor can decide to encourage participants to role play by using a chart or slide with this information:

**THE VALUE OF ROLE-PLAYING**

Sometimes participants are shy about demonstrating what they are learning yet doing so via role play is often the best way to integrate a new concept. The workshop leader can encourage participants to join in role playing exercises by introducing them to this Chinese proverb:

**Ancient Chinese proverb:**

我听到，我忘了，我看，我记得我和我的理解。

“I hear and I forget.

I see and I remember.

I do and I understand.”

Only when a thing produces action can it be said to have been truly learned. This is why role playing is used to demonstrate concepts and to give clients the opportunity to practice and
improve holding each part of a marriage meeting, with support and coaching from the therapist or workshop leader.

**Differentiating between the workshop/class format and a therapy format.**

In the class the focus is on the structure of a marriage meeting and how to hold a marriage meeting effectively. There is no expectation that participants reveal anything that feels private about themselves. In therapy, individuals and couples bring out where they are feeling stuck in relating and communicating and the therapist intervenes to assist them in more productive ways to communicate.

Psychotherapy helps so many people to get past stumbling blocks and improve their relationships. This class is for many couples who have a good level of trust and want to learn new, effective ways to keep their relationship thriving.

Encourage participants to have an open mind and implement whatever works for them as individuals and as a couple to grow their relationship.

*Changing Habits* is an important focus of this class. Show the exercise of folding hands in the way we usually interlock our fingers and then the other way to demonstrate that it takes effort and commitment to change a habit; in this case we are talking about developing new habits and styles for communication.

4. Instructor explains basics of how to conduct a 4-part marriage meeting. Include stating key guidelines listed below:

**Do:**

- Make sure to have the meeting in one sitting, as each part builds on the part before.
- Schedule the meeting at a time when both of you are well rested, sober, alert, and not hungry.
• Keep an appointment book handy.
• Meet where you are both comfortable.
• Limit the length of the meeting to no longer than 45 minutes (prevents fatigue).
• Be patient with yourselves and each other while practicing new skills.

Don’t:
• allow interruptions – let voice mail handle phone calls.
• expect to resolve long standing problems in one meeting.
• think that you have to wait for a marriage meeting to express appreciation or discuss a pressing concern.

5. Instructor invites and answers questions.

Participants practice each part of the meeting.

Therapist or workshop leader explains four parts of a marriage meeting and why it is important to have them in order and at one sitting. It’s like a roller coaster ride in which the high parts propel the other parts of the ride. Appreciation creates good feelings, which make the Chores discussion likely to go well; then planning good times brings more good energy, which makes it likely that discussion of Challenges will be respectful, collaborative and constructive. Some people think it’s a letdown to end the meeting by talking about Problems and Challenges, but it’s usually a good way to conclude because a sense of “we’re in this together as a team” or closure occurs. It’s helpful to encourage clients to thank each other for meeting when the meeting concludes. They may also want to shake hands, hug, or recharge themselves in separate activities.

Instructor should state dos and don’ts for each part of meeting before couples practice that part.
Instructor should teach active listening skill before asking the group to roleplay the Problems and Challenges part of the meeting.

Instructor should be available to answer questions people have when all the couples enact each part of a marriage meeting. Participants can signal the instructor, who then comes over to listen to their communication and provide validation or on the spot coaching as needed.

The instructor can introduce the communication skills listed above (I-Statements, Self-Talk, Congruent Communication, Nonverbal Communication, Active Listening, Constructive Feedback, and Brainstorming for Solutions) at the first workshop session, to the extent that time permits.

**Demonstrating Each Communication Style People Use When Disagreement Occurs**

One suggestion for a situation to role play is below; more scenarios are suggested further below, after the class outline for a two-session workshop.

**Role play #1** demonstrates blaming and placating and other types of communication that are not congruent, using a hypothetical example where one wants the other to clear his or her clutter from the garage or elsewhere in the house. But what one labels as clutter the other views as treasures.

**Role play #2** to demonstrate the same situation where each one actively listens to the other, and each communicates in a congruent manner.

A) Choose who the speaker is and who the listener is.

B) Reverse roles so the other gets to express his or her point of view.

While one couple is role playing congruent communication, the other participants watch and be prepared to demonstrate giving constructive feedback to the role playing couple.
The second workshop session, held a week later, should allow ample time to demonstrate and ask participants to practice using communication skills by roleplaying with each other or with the instructor.

7. Discussion, review key points.

8. Instructor tells couples to now schedule a time before next week’s class to hold a Marriage Meeting on their own.

9. Offer a suggested reading list, on which this book appears which gives step by step instructions for holding marriage meetings and using positive communication skills: *Marriage Meetings for Lasting Love: 30 Minutes a Week to the Relationship You’ve Always Wanted*, by Marcia Naomi Berger. Also distribute Marriage Meeting Agenda forms that include key points for conducting each agenda topic.

**Session 2 of Workshop**

1. Instructor asks:

   A. for brief reports on marriage meetings conducted during the week. Which parts went well? Which parts would you like to refine further?

   B. What specific communication skill(s) would you like to cover during tonight’s class? Active Listening followed by brainstorming solutions demonstrated engages the group as all are invited to toss in their brainstorming ideas. If no one volunteers a challenge, instructor can provide one as an example and participants can volunteer to demonstrate how to address the issue with active listening and then move on to brainstorming.

   C. Ask participants if they’ve identified a habit of their own (not their partner’s!) that
they’d like to change, or a new habit they’d like to develop regarding how you communicate with their partner?

2. Discuss, demonstrate, and give participants the opportunity to practice using the skill they’d like to make habitual.

3. Questions and review of key points.

4. Ask participants to schedule a time for their next marriage meeting.

5. Complete evaluation form.

Suggestions for Roleplaying to demonstrate communication techniques reviewed earlier:

Workshop leaders can demonstrate communication techniques using examples of real-life situations that participants offer, present hypothetical situations listed below, or create their own examples.

Any scenario listed below can serve as a catalyst for demonstrating or roleplaying any one of these communication techniques:

- I-Statements
- Self-Talk
- Congruent communication versus blaming, placating, reasonable, and irrelevant messages
- Verbal and Nonverbal communication
- Active Listening
- Constructive Feedback
- Brainstorming for Solutions (use Active Listening skill first)
Instructor may explain the difference between the *content* and *process* of communication. The words are the content; how people express their thoughts and feelings about the situation is the process.

**Sample Scenarios to Demonstrate or Roleplay above Communication Techniques:**

A couple is in a car; the husband is driving. The car is making the sounds that indicate it can run out of gas any moment

- A wife lets her husband know she is upset with her husband when they get home from a dinner with another couple where her husband shared some details about her mother’s illness that she considers private.
- A couple is very responsible about taking care of chores, but they are starting to notice that they are not planning enough relaxing, enjoyable time together and for themselves.
- A husband would like to have some overnight guests more often, but the wife finds all the work involved burdensome.
- A wife wants more quality time with her husband, but every night after dinner he retreats to his den with the newspaper and television.
- The couple agrees on a set time for their child to go to bed. The husband is in charge of the bedtime routine. However, he often forgets to enforce the bedtime, and the child often goes to bed later. The wife is annoyed with him for not keeping his agreement and he thinks she is making a big deal over nothing, what’s another fifteen, thirty, or forty-five minutes anyway?
Q & A about Marriage Meetings

Therapists can expect to be asked questions about marriage meetings and hear client’s concerns about holding a weekly meeting with their partner. Below are some frequently asked questions and suggested answers:

Q: What exactly is a marriage meeting?
A: A marriage meeting (or for an unmarried cohabiting couple you might call it a couple’s meeting), is a gentle conversation with a loosely structured agenda. Couples who hold successful meetings according to the recommended guidelines and use positive communication skills find that they gain more romance, intimacy, teamwork, and smoother resolution of issues. The meetings have a simple four-part agenda: Appreciation, Chores, Planning Good Times, and Problems and Challenges. The meetings empower couples to create the kind of marriage they’ve always wanted — one that fosters the growth and well-being of both partners in all the important ways — emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

Q: Isn’t it better to wait until there’s a problem? Why stir things up when we’re getting along okay?
A: An obvious need exists for a proactive approach for marriage success. Divorce is epidemic. Fifty percent of first marriages fail. The statistics are more dismal for second and third marriages. *Marriage Meetings for Lasting Love* is unique because it provides an ongoing system for creating and maintaining forever, the kind of relationship we all long for—a loving, lifelong one that fosters the growth and vitality of both partners in all the important ways—emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

Q: What kinds of couples benefit most from holding marriage meetings?
Couples who want to make a good marriage even better benefit from holding marriage meetings. The meetings also are good for people who want to change a so-so relationship into a more fulfilling one.
Even the healthiest couples have differences that they can learn to deal with more smoothly, which can be about in-laws, money, parenting, sex, and so on. Some couples say that they aren’t getting along as well as they used to. Marriage meetings can help them get back on track.

Actually, all kinds of people, married and single, can benefit from using the positive communication skills recommended for marriage meetings. They are helpful for any relationship, including with friends, family members, and coworkers.

**Q: Why can’t we just talk instead of having to conform to the artificial structure of the meeting?**

**A:** “Just talking” is fine and certainly desirable on a daily basis. It is easy, however, with all life’s pressures, to communicate in ways that do not foster a positive connection with your partner or resolve issues. You may want to discuss an issue when your partner is preoccupied—watching television, reading, or doing something else. The marriage meeting covers all bases; it allows each person to feel heard and understood, without interruptions and counter-arguments. It provides a predictable time to talk about anything—positively and respectfully.

It’s easy to take one’s partner for granted, to forget to express appreciation. Chores can pile up or not be handled well. You may forget to plan dates and other enjoyable activities. By scheduling a time for a Marriage Meeting, you will get to reconnect every week. The meetings foster direct, positive communication that addresses concerns at a time both of you are likely to be receptive. You get to feel appreciated and valued, gain a smoother running household by coordinating chores, and add romance by planning dates. Issues are resolved, and challenges are met before they escalate into crises and grudges.

**Q: What if one spouse wants to try holding a marriage meeting but the other refuses?**

**A:** The reluctant partner might fear getting criticized. So, keep the first several meetings light and enjoyable. Doing this helps you gain confidence about holding the meetings. The goal for your first meeting is for it to be enjoyable enough that both of you will want to schedule a second meeting, and
so on. Use positive communication techniques to express yourself clearly while being kind and supportive.

Choose a time to bring up the subject of trying a marriage meeting when you’re both relaxed and available. You can say, “I would be very grateful to you for trying a marriage meeting at least once.” You can state some advantages of marriage meetings, such as:

They help the two of you to re-connect and feel appreciated by each other.
They increase teamwork around taking care of household tasks and other activities.
They remind you to plan to go out on an enjoyable date each week.

If your partner is still not convinced, try negotiating. For example, if basketball’s not your thing and he wants you to go to a game with him, say okay— on one condition— that he’ll hold a marriage meeting with you. If he agrees, schedule your meeting right them.

Men tend to like marriage meetings once they get used to them. The meeting’s structure makes it easier for the less verbal partner, who is typically— but not always— the husband, to speak up and be heard.

Q. Isn’t scheduling a formal weekly meeting unromantic?
A. Marriage meetings actually increase romance! They increase communication, which is a powerful aphrodisiac. They foster mutual appreciation and remind you to plan a date for just the two of you. The meetings clear up misunderstandings that can result in grudge holding. Grudges dampen romance. The meetings prevent grudges from building, so romance can flourish.

Q: How do we decide who talks first about topics covered in a Marriage Meeting?
A: Usually, the less verbal partner should talk first and lead the meeting. This helps him or her to share ownership of the meeting. Reflect back what you hear your partner saying when appropriate, using the Active Listening communication skill.

Q: So are we supposed to express appreciation, and talk about chores and problems only during our Marriage Meetings?
A: Of course not! Spouses should express appreciation daily. If a pipe bursts or if a chore needs to be done immediately, you don’t wait for your marriage meeting to call a plumber or to arrange how to handle the pressing task.

If you feel like you need to express yourself about something your partner did that either pleased you greatly or annoyed you immensely, you don’t wait for your weekly meeting to do this, but still do your best to communicate positively. Your marriage meeting is a commitment the two of you make to provide a time to make sure that all aspects of your relationship are given attention on a regular basis.

Q: I’ve heard that some people hold Marriage Meetings less often than once a week. Why do you encourage people to hold the meetings every week?

A: The meetings foster connection and prevent grudges from accumulating about any aspect of your relationship. Yet, some couples meet every two weeks or once a month. Weekly is best for most couples, because they assure that you and your partner will have a chance to reconnect at least that often. As one wife who values appreciation and closure said, “If we don’t hold a weekly meeting, I feel clogged up.” All couples who hold successful meetings find them valuable for keeping their relationship on track.

A psychologist in a class for professionals about marriage meetings said, “I know only one happily married couple. They’ve been holding a weekly meeting for fifty years.”

Q: Do we need to keep holding marriage meetings for the rest of our lives in order to keep our relationship on track?

A: Not necessarily. One wife said that after she and her husband used to hold the meetings regularly and that their improved communication has been long-lasting enough that they no longer feel the need for formal meetings. This couple excels at going with the flow and at working around each other’s imperfections. Both are accepting, flexible, and satisfied with their relationship.
Some other couples similarly report that after they stopped holding marriage meetings, the improvement in their relationship was sustained. They continue to express appreciation often, communicate positively, and deal with issues promptly.

But if you value the intimacy, reconnecting regularly, teamwork, and closure that marriage meetings foster, you can gain these benefits by investing a small amount of time each week by holding the meetings. Marriage meetings are a form of insurance.

**Q: Do you need to be married in order to benefit from Marriage Meetings?**

**A:** Any two people who live under the same roof can benefit from holding weekly meetings using the marriage meeting format. After reading about marriage meetings, a friend and his roommate began conducting effective weekly “roommate meetings.”

**Q: If we have longstanding grudges and unresolved issues, couldn’t a marriage meeting backfire?**

**A:** Ideally, after both partners have learned how to hold a marriage meeting, they will be able to conduct a successful one on their own. Realistically, such couples are more likely to need to be helped by a therapist because they get stuck on blaming or trying to change each other, or because the trust level is too low for them to allow themselves to be vulnerable enough to use positive communication techniques. As the therapist coaches them through a marriage meeting, he or she will quickly gain diagnostic information on which to base a treatment plan, which may or may not include marriage meetings, depending on the clients’ readiness to follow the guidelines and agenda and to try out new ways of communicating. Clients who are not ready to be coached through a marriage meeting by a therapist are more likely to benefit from individual therapy, or from a standard approach to couple therapy.

Once a couple is ready to use the positive communication techniques described in *Marriage Meetings for Lasting Love*, they should be able to hold successful meetings.
Q: How can we be expected to find the time to hold a weekly meeting when we’re already so busy?

A: The therapist can say, “If you have time to fight or stew, you have time for a marriage meeting. Marriage meetings save time and money!”

Marriage meetings do not replace therapy for couples whose concerns call for professional help. But if your marriage is basically healthy, you can hold the meetings on your own, and avoid the expense of therapy.

It eats up time and energy to silently ruminate about whatever may be happening in your relationship that is not getting handled. It takes less time to hold a marriage meeting.

The meetings also save money also by providing a forum for talking about potential expenditures rationally and respectfully. They help you become more accountable to each other financially and cooperate about spending, saving and sharing money.

By holding effective meetings, you get to reconnect regularly. Each of you gets to wipe clean your slate of mental clutter. Once you get used to holding the meetings, you will probably be able to complete the agenda successfully within about half an hour.

Q. Can any marriage be saved by holding a weekly marriage meeting?

A. A marriage meeting cannot save any marriage. Some people marry for the wrong reasons, such as physical attraction, money, or some other material concern. Later they realize that they are too incompatible to stay together. When their values and goals are too different, there may be no way to save the marriage. Also, some couples have serious issues, such as physical or emotional abuse, addictions, or infidelity. Such people will need to restore their relationship before they would be able to hold effective marriage meetings.

But for couples who are basically healthy, compatible, and have similar enough values, marriage meetings are a great way to reconnect every week. The meetings foster romance and intimacy, teamwork, and smoother handling of whatever comes up.
Q. Don’t some couples just grow apart?

A. We’ve probably all heard that “We just grew apart” comment. The truth is that couples do not grow apart; they *drift away* from each other either because they lack the tools for staying connected or they have them but forget to use them. Marriage meetings are a weekly wake-up call for reconnecting and growing together.

**SUMMARY**

Marriage meetings helps couples succeed in long term relationships. Therapists can teach couples how to conduct marriage meetings during private sessions or by leading workshops for couples.

Marriage has evolved in recent decades from a relationship with fixed roles for men and women that was often necessary for economic wellbeing, social status, sex with a long-term partner, and child rearing. Today, these reasons for marrying no longer apply for most people. People now marry because they long for emotional and spiritual fulfillment, whether or not they are aware of these motivations.

Most couples need to learn new skills in order to foster and maintain a lasting, satisfying marriage.

Marriage meetings provide both a structure and communication techniques that support the growth and vitality of both partners in an egalitarian union. They empower couples to reconnect every week. They virtually eliminate grudge holding because misunderstandings get cleared up promptly. The meetings typically help resolve issues and provide a satisfying sense of closure. Partners are reminded that they appreciate and value each other. The improved communication skills that they practice in each marriage meeting tend to carry over into everyday interactions with each other, and also into relationships with family members, friends,
and coworkers. The meetings have been shown to be effective for couples of various ages, stages, genders, and cultures.

Often women are more motivated than men to hold the meetings. Many men fear being criticized, presented with a long to-do list of tasks, or being overwhelmed by a more vocal female partner. But once they conduct a marriage meeting in accordance with the prescribed guidelines, four-part agenda, and communication skills, men tend to like the meeting’s structure and guidelines, which assure that both partners get heard, appreciated, and respected.

Most couples who come to therapy need to be coached through a marriage meeting a number of times before they will be able to conduct effective meetings on their own. Those who already communicate respectfully are likely to be able to hold marriage meetings on their own once they are shown how.

About half of the couples who participate in a marriage meeting workshop subsequently hold effective marriage meetings on their own. The others are candidates for therapy in order to get past what is preventing them from communicating respectfully.

Many couples are already conducting successful marriage meetings. Countless more can benefit once they learn how to hold effective marriage meetings. Therefore, the marriage meeting tool is an important one for therapists to add to their repertoire of skills.

Endnotes


Adapted from Changing Destructive Adolescent Behavior, A Parent Workbook, by Ralph Fry, Susan Mejia Johnson, Pete Melendez, Dr. Roger Morgan, copyright 2002, page 141. Distributed by Parent Project, Inc.

The constructive criticism section here appears in *Marriage Meetings for Lasting Love: 30 Minutes a Week to the Relationship You’ve Always Wanted*, by Marcia Naomi Berger (New World Library, 2014).


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