

Marriage Education vs. Counseling: How Do We Know Which is Right for Us?

Everyone can use a little help improving their relationship.

Healthy marriage takes a lot of work and often presents us with challenges that take time to overcome. Everyone can use a little help in improving their relationship. Sometimes joining a group of couples who are learning tools to keep their marriage strong can help. Other times a counselor or therapist who meets one-on-one with you and your spouse is what you need. But how do you know which is right for you?

Here are some of the key things to consider:

Marriage Education:

Marriage education is simply what it says: education.

You can learn different ideas for solving problems, and talking about your feelings. Marriage education is designed to improve your relationship and skills. It can provide couples with the tools to have a happy,

healthy, strong marriage and can be useful at any stage of marriage. Most marriage education programs can help couples learn to:

- Improve communication
- Resolve conflict productively (a key characteristic in couples that thrive in marriage)
- Handle differences in expectations
- Deal with anger and emotions constructively
- Learning how to forgive and make healthy sacrifices to benefit the relationship
- Work together as a team
- Included or restore fun and healthy sexuality in the relationship
- Strengthen your trust in and commitment to the relationship.

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Most importantly, marriage education has the goal of helping to strengthen your marriage and family life and to prevent marital distress or breakdown. Most couples can learn something new, whether you are dating or have been married for 20 years. Educational seminars are usually held in a group setting through a series of workshops or sessions led by a trained leader. You can also learn marriage education through couple retreats, self-help books, and videos. Marriage education is a great way to keep your

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marriage on the right track by giving you the tools to handle issues like job stress, parenting, aging parents, money problems or anything else that can be hard to discuss.

Marriage Counseling:

Marriage counseling (or couples therapy) is a service that couples seek when they can no longer manage issues, and are questioning the level of commitment to their marriage. Marriage counseling is provided by a trained, licensed professional who can give you personal advice and help you with serious issues that keep getting in the way of your relationship. Many counselors may include marriage education into your sessions, but it is a more specialized service. Seek help from a professional if you or your spouse have any of the following:

- Addictions or substance abuse
- Emotional or physical abuse
- Sexual problems
- Severe child behavior issues
- Significant financial problems
- Difficulty with blending families
- A partner has been unfaithful in the marriage
- Constant fighting and anger
- Mental health issues (such as depression or eating disorders)
- When one spouse considers leaving the relationship
- If you're staying in the relationship only because of your children.

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If you believe that your marriage might be in trouble or you are having any of the issues listed above, consider seeking professional help. Ultimately, marriage counseling itself cannot save a marriage. Only two people who are committed to work to overcome hardships can save a marriage. With the help of a professional, however, many couples who thought counseling wouldn't work find that they have very happy, satisfying relationships today.

Thanks to Joyce Webb, PhD., a psychologist with experience working with couples as a counselor and teaching marriage education workshops, for her contribution to this tip sheet.

This is a product of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, Ph.D., and project manager, Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH. This document was authored by Sharrie McIntosh, MPH, Mary Hyde, PhD, and Kendy Cox. The NHMRC would also like to thank Whitney Engstrom, Rachel Darrington, MSW and Theodora Ooms, MSW for their research and contribution efforts.

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