

Thursday, February 18, 2010

## **PRE-MARITAL COUNSELLING**

“I didn’t know he would be so reckless with money”

“Everything changed since her sister moved in with us”

“He never listens to me, his family’s opinion is the only one that counts”

“This child does not respect me at all; I don’t know whether it is because I am not his father”

Any of these statements familiar? Well, these are some of the things I, and other therapists, would hear from clients during sessions. These verbalisations would typically happen in the context of couples therapy when the couple are at loggerheads with each other and things have become unbearable. I would then ask: “Did you not negotiate about these issues before you got married”? The response would typically be a “No” or one of those “poor me” stares. It is at these moments that I would be reminded of the importance of pre-marital counselling.

### **Why is pre-marital counselling important?**

I like to use the analogy of a used car to drive home the importance of pre-marital counselling. People who are getting married are not brand new. Like used cars, they look perfect and clean but as they start to live with each other and closer inspections are taken, tiny dents and scratches start to show. As is the case with used cars, the other may sometimes feel, “I might not have chosen it had I seen that dent before purchasing it”; put differently: “I might not have married her/him had I known about this problem before we were married”.

In human terms, an equivalent of dents and scratches I refer to above would be emotional scarring that manifests itself as a person’s personality traits, habits, tendencies, communication style, patterns of relating and other conditions of being human. By saying people are not brand new I refer to the fact that all people are a product of their socialisation and social experience. These social experiences that we accumulated through our maturing years have left an imprint in our personalities so that we tend to have consistent patterns of relating that are shaped by these experiences. For example, a person who was raised in a climate of a hostile and conflict-ridden marital relationship may develop hostile and adversarial ways of relating with people in intimate relationships. Contrariwise, someone who grew up in a warm and loving family would not have difficulties establishing trust in an

intimate relationship.

Pre-marital counselling is a process by which the about-to-marry couple open their proverbial cupboards so that their spouse-to-be can take a peek and see what is inside. If they do not like what they see, their fears and expectations can be discussed in the safe space of therapy. Couples get to negotiate around the various issues that are known to give rise to conflict in marriage. The advantage of such negotiations is that the couple start to “work” on their marriage before issues become a problem. This is akin to the Setswana proverb that it is easier to bend a twig while it is still wet (fresh or young, that is). Issues that are addressed during pre-marital counselling are less likely to have disastrous consequences if they cop up during the marriage as the statements at the beginning of the blog are unlikely to be heard.

The issues that I get couples to work on during pre-marital counselling sessions include:

- Values - both personal values and the values the couple want to adopt and live by.
- Money: what are going to be the rules of money in our family.
- In-laws.
- Careers.
- Communication.
- Children (especially when one partner would be inheriting).
- Type of marriage contract (in or out of community).
- Personality differences.
- Misfortunes (e.g chronic illness, bankruptcy and so on).

In addition to these, the couple would often have the issues they want to negotiate.

I usually contract six sessions with the couple. The first two would be my individual meeting with either of them so that I get to know them we start working jointly from the second session when I give them feedback on my observations and suggest things to talk about. We would spend two more sessions with them doing negotiations. Often, I recommend that the couple keep a journal of the things they discuss outside the sessions so that we do a thorough discussion of them in sessions. The last session would occur six months into the marriage and focuses on the progress the couple are making on the issues that formed the focus of the negotiations.