



## Preparing for the future – the benefits of pre-marital counselling

Even if we haven't experienced it ourselves, most of us are familiar with couples counselling – “couples going to therapy” is practically a subgenre of romantic comedy at this point.

But it's safe to say that pre-marital counselling hasn't had the same exposure in popular culture. How does it work exactly?

### What is pre-marital counselling?

Simply put, pre-marital counselling is a form of couples counselling that is intended to help you and your partner prepare for marriage. It provides an opportunity to highlight the strengths of your relationship and identify potential areas of tension or conflict. Through reflection and discussion, you will work with your counsellor to build tools and strategies to help navigate your future life together.

### What are the benefits?

“Pre-marital counselling helps couples ensure that they have a solid relationship foundation as they are starting their life together,” says Jenna Dyck, marriage and family therapy intern with Manitoba Blue Cross's Employee Assistance Program. “It allows couples the opportunity to gain deeper understanding of their values, beliefs, and expectations.”

Through counselling, couples benefit from learning communication skills and conflict resolution techniques. For couples who are unsure about whether marriage is the right step, pre-marital counselling allows space to explore these concerns and provide clarity in the decision-making process.

### What's the difference between pre-marital counselling and regular couples counselling?

One major difference is that pre-marital counselling takes a more proactive approach. Couples work to identify sources of tension or conflict that may arise in the future, rather than deal with them after they happen.



“Often in couples therapy we are working to change longstanding relationship patterns that may have been in place for years,” Dyck says. “In pre-marital counselling, you can choose the patterns you want to create and adjust pre-existing patterns before they become so entrenched.”

The commitment level in pre-marital counselling can also look different, she adds.

“A major goal of pre-marital counselling for many couples is to explore their compatibility before making a commitment such as engagement or marriage. In regular couples counselling, people have often made a commitment like that already and it can be much more complicated if these couples decide that they are not compatible.”

### **What does an average session look like?**

“While this will vary from counsellor to counsellor, couples typically begin with an initial assessment phase where the counsellor gets to know each partner better and develop an understanding of their relationship dynamics,” Dyck says.

This phase can include formal assessments, such as relationship questionnaires, along with other tools.

“This is a great time to share any goals or concerns with your therapist,” Dyck says. “Following the assessment phase, sessions typically focus on exploring common areas that couples can struggle with such as finances, religion, gender roles, sex, children, and relationships with families of origin.”

### **Who benefits from pre-marital counselling?**

Everyone can benefit from pre-marital counselling, Dyck says.

“For couples who may already be experiencing some conflict or challenges, this can be an opportunity for you to explore these dynamics in a safe space. You can identify if these are conflicts that can be managed with new tools and strategies or reflect on whether this relationship is ultimately a good fit.”

And even for couples who have a solid relationship, this can be an opportunity to consciously build a foundation for the next phase. Exploring and naming strengths can make it easier to continue to build on them in the future.

### **When is pre-marital counselling not a good fit?**

Pre-marital counselling wouldn't be recommended if one or

both members of the couple are dealing with issues that would be better addressed by individual therapy, such as addictions or mental illness, Dyck says.

“These can certainly be topics that are discussed in pre-marital counselling, but if someone is experiencing significant difficulties in these areas, it would be advisable to first work on addressing these issues individually before exploring them in a pre-marital context,” she says.

Additionally, pre-marital counselling would not be recommended in situations where there is ongoing intimate partner violence.

### **Addressing the stigma**

Some couples are hesitant to attend counselling, because they think that doing so may mean their relationship is struggling.

“Going to counselling is no reflection on the compatibility or quality of your relationship,” Dyck says. “Some of that belief comes from ongoing stigma about accessing counselling and other mental health supports. When people go to see their family doctor for regular checkups, we don't necessarily assume that they are sick. It works the same way for counselling. Even the most compatible couples benefit from taking space to explore and discuss their relationship in a counselling setting.”

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