

**Premarital Counseling:
Washington Post
Transcript of an On-Line Chat**

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While most people who attend premarital counseling take a religiously themed course, such as the Pre-Cana classes usually required for marriage in the Roman Catholic Church, a growing number are flocking to secular therapists for short-term couples counseling before their wedding.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D., executive director of National Institute of Relationship Enhancement in Bethesda, Md., was online Tuesday, Feb. 28, 2006 at noon ET to field questions and comments about secular premarital counseling.

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The Transcript follows.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Welcome everyone.

I'm now online and will begin to look at and respond to some of the questions that have been submitted.

Rob Scuka

Richmond, Va.: Dear Scuka:

Thanks for taking our questions!

As a pastor in a Protestant Church, I have mixed feelings about the effectiveness of premarital counseling. When I meet with the couple, in addition to the religious aspect of marriage, I bring up the hot button topics like: Family of origin issues, attitudes about money/saving, children and discipline, etc. I get the feeling that often they just sit there and nod their head just to "get it over with" because they have already made up their mind they are getting married despite uncovering some potential deal-breaking obstacles. What role do you see pastors, other religious leaders, in this process of pre marital counseling?

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Dear Pastor.

Your question is very important. I think pastors often represent the first line of opportunity for engaged couples in terms of helping them take a serious look at their relationship and their impending decision. But I believe that asking the important and hard questions is not enough. I think it is important for pastors to equip themselves with the skills to teach engaged couples how to communicate effectively and constructively with one another so that they can actually engage the issues in a real and meaningful manner. An alternative strategy is to refer the couple to a premarital or couples workshop to learn the skills that research has demonstrated can help couples have richer, more satisfying relationships by helping them learn how to communicate better.

Rob Scuka

Washington, D.C.: Hi Dr. Scuka,

What do you think are the most important values that couples should be in agreement on before they decide to get married? Kids and finances are a given, but what am I forgetting? Thanks!

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Coming from different religious backgrounds may pose some very significant issues relating to the raising and religious education of children. This should most definitely be addressed BEFORE getting married. What are your respective visions of the kind of life you want to live together and as a family? Good Luck! Rob Scuka

Confused: I read your article on the Post with great interest. I've been having communications problems with my boyfriend and we even tried counseling. However, nothing get resolved at the counseling and we subsequently decided to part our ways. My question for you is, how do you know that the problem you're having is workable and that you can still have a future together? How and when do you tell yourself this is just not going to work, no matter how hard you try?

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Dear Confused. Your question is not an easy one to answer. The first thing is: do both parties remain genuinely interested in trying to make it work? If so, then I suggest attending a weekend workshop devoted to learning concrete communication and problem solving skills. In addition, or as a substitute, go to counseling together for the same purpose - to learn skills that can help you communicate more effectively and at a deeper level to get to the core issues and desires. You perhaps call it a day when you come to a point of realizing that even though you may care for and even love one another, the simple reality is that what the two of you want out of life is not compatible. Good luck!

Rob Scuka

Washington, D. C.: Can you suggest any resources in the DC area for couple counseling that deals in stressful, unhealthy work experiences. My husband and I have just returned to DC after a prolonged stay in Africa and we are having a hard time adjusting to US life again...de-stressing, bringing up old arguments, letting go of painful situations, etc. Any ideas on who best deals with this type issue? Thanks.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Dear DC: Washington is an incredibly stressful environment, especially so on relationships. Seeking help is a wise decision. You can try the Couples Relationship Weekend at the National Institute of Relationship Enhancement at www.nire.org. (Disclosure: This is the organization I am with.) Also many churches have couples workshops. Finally, you can try a mental health professional who specializes in stress reduction techniques and life-style changes.
Rob Scuka

Washington, D.C.: I have been married less than a year. My husband and I did not participate in premarital counseling prior to getting married. We are now fighting a lot and living separately. We are working on the issues we have in couples therapy and individually in counseling. Many of the problems we are having now we should have and could have easily addressed in pre martial counseling. Do you feel it is best for us to live together during this time or separate?

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Dear Washington: I am sad to hear about your experience. It actually serves as testimony, of sorts, as to the vital importance of premarital counseling. Since you are married, no I would not recommend separating while you are attempting to work through your issues - unless there is physical abuse or extreme emotional abuse happening. In those tragic circumstances, I would advise a person to seek assistance to deal with those issues, and to consider the possibility of separation. Take care. Rob Scuka

Washington, D.C.: The company that I work for offers an Employee Assistance Program. Through the EAP, my fiancée and I have been able to receive free premarital counseling. Are the EAP programs just as good as the "pay" programs? Is it beneficial to take more than one premarital class? Additionally, we are taking religion classes through a local Rabbi. She was raised Catholic, I am Jewish. She is in the process of converting to Judaism. We have learned quite a bit from each other through this process, too. We have both secular and religious counseling to a certain extent. Are premarital programs the "best" way? What other methods are effective, beneficial, or indicate long relationships? Thanks!

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Congratulations on following through on several different avenues! I think that's great. I would suggest that whether to take more than one premarital class depends on whether you feel you have learned concrete SKILLS that will help the two of you sustain your relationship on a long-term basis. Skill such as listening empathically and acknowledging one

another's feelings, concerns and desires; expressing yourself skillfully so that you don't cause one another needless defensiveness; learning how to approach difficult issues from the perspective of "we're in this together and we need to find a way to make this work for both of us" rather than "it's me versus you and my primary interest is in how can I maximize my personal gain in the situation." What I would recommend on a longer-term basis is that you both commit to attending a special couple's workshop or retreat once every year or two as a way of nurturing and sustaining your marriage for the long haul. I hope you have a great life together. Rob Scuka

Burke, Va.: Hi Robert,

Why the shift from religious based counseling? The article doesn't really address this. Do they not use the same techniques? Or is it because a lot of couples either have different religious backgrounds like the article's "lead couple" or no religious background?

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: It's not so much a shift, as that they co-exist side by side, in part because some people have no religious affiliation. The real key is whether any given program teaches concrete communication and problem-solving skills, with lots of coaching and skills practice and dialogue time. That is the real divide, from my point of view, because too many programs are not sufficiently SKILL-based. That's what you really want to look for when you are shopping for a program. Rob Scuka

Silver Spring, Md.: I've been in a relationship for about a year now. We do have a strong love since the beginning but the thing is that I noticed that although there's love violence has come in. We argue over stupid things out of jealousy, infidelity, which end up in bad violent physically and verbally abusive. Recently he hit me in the face and I reported him to the police because it was getting out of hand. But now I have forgiven him. I do love him a lot and he does to me, I just need to know if there's hope in changing his aggressiveness, jealousy, and machismo, or am I just really stupid to stay with him.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Dear SS: Please do not accept violence from anyone in any relationship. If he can do it to you, he can do it to your children as well. People can change, but they have to want to, AND they have to take concrete steps to get their violent behavior under control. Please insist that he get help if he wants to remain in a relationship with you. If he refuses, leave and move on with your life. You deserve better. An absolutely superb resource is Dr. Steven Stosny at www.compassionpower.com. He's one of the leading experts in the field. Good luck. Rob Scuka

Midwest: Do you ever advise a couple not to get married? Under what circumstances?

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: When there is a loss of respect for the other person; when there is violence; when what you want out of life is incompatible with what other person wants; when you feel that your concerns and feelings are constantly being dismissed by the other person.

Columbia, Md.: Dr. Scuka,

Are there marriage education classes instead of therapy and how much do they cost? I saw the \$2400 figure and can't afford that price. Do you have suggestions?

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Our weekend program (see previous reply) costs \$395.00.

Arlington, Va.: I have mixed feelings about the idea of people who aren't married attending counseling. I guess my feeling is that if you have to work this hard in a relationship maybe that's a sign that the relationship isn't a good one. I know that idea isn't necessarily true but it's definitely an underlying thought.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Dear Arlington: Many relationships are difficult, but have the potential to be good and even great relationships. Don't give up until you have it given it every chance - and marriage education classes and/or counseling is the way to go to learn what you may not know in terms of HOW to have a good relationship. Rob Scuka

Arlington, Va.: Dr. Scuka, thank you for taking my question. My boyfriend and I are in an interfaith relationship (he's Jewish, I'm Christian), and we've been talking about marriage for several months now. I would like to find either a program or a therapist that specializes in interfaith counseling, is not biased toward either faith, and yet is knowledgeable about both faiths and traditions. What are your suggestions in how I go about this? I think I would rather have an individual counselor rather than a group program, just because our issues are so specific, yet I know we could benefit from a general program as well. Are there any groups/resources in the DC area that you could recommend?

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: I'm sorry that I do not have a specific referral for you, but perhaps try Google under Interfaith Counseling in the Washington DC area, and see what comes up. Alternatively, call some rabbis and ministers and ask for a referral to such a person.

Washington, D.C.: When seeking pre-marital counseling, what types of topics should be discussed? How proactive should it be? Will a counselor be able at any point to give an opinion?

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: The big issues to discuss are money, having and raising children, extended families, religion and other values, sexual intimacy, and what you want out of life. Premarital counseling should ALWAYS have a skills-based component. Ask. If it doesn't, move on until you find one that does, or supplement premarital counseling with attending a skills-based workshop on communication, problem-solving, conflict management, etc.

Opinions are shared sparingly, but always in service of the relationship and in particular to help a couple avoid a potential pitfall.

Washington, D.C.: I have an issue with getting very close to this girl because she has already been married once and has three children. She tells me to get over it and it is no big deal. What should I do?

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: If you cannot fully accept the 3 children as part of the package, then please do the woman a favor and move on. She - and they - deserve nothing less.

Washington, D.C: My boyfriend and I have been together one year, and we have both discussed marriage. However, I am at a loss on how to get him to understand that my expectations of him are progressive -- what was okay a year ago, isn't enough now, especially with long-term plans being discussed. How do I get him to embrace the need for more serious planning and openness.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: You cannot "get" someone to understand your desires. (Desires and requests are OK; expectations and demands are a firestorm waiting to happen.) The question you have to ask yourself is: Do I have confidence that this person is interested in and willing to try to meet my desires (and me his), or am I frequently feeling as though my concerns are being dismissed?

If the latter, not a good prognosis. Though that is not the end of the story. Request that you both attend a couples workshop or counseling. His answer to that question will also tell you a lot of what you need to know.

Blacksburg, Va.: My husband and I have a happy marriage, but we would still like to work on improving communication. We did not have premarital counseling. Are there similar classes for married people? We don't feel we need individual marital counseling.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Yes, there are plenty of workshops for married couples. See some of my previous replies.

Washington, D.C.: Dear Mr. Scuka, I am recently engaged after 6 years of dating. Do you find that prolonged dating or engagement can help the success of marriage in the future? What do you recommend for couples who can't afford extensive pre-marital counseling programs? Are there steps we can take as a couple without third party assistance?

Thanks!

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Some religious organizations offer very inexpensive classes.

As for what you can do on your own: Sit down for 30 minutes with no interruptions. Take turns sharing, speaking kindly.

Do not interrupt the other person. Try your best to acknowledge verbally what you understand the other person to be feeling and desiring. Look at one another as you do this. Share a partner appreciation with one another at least once a day!

Chicago, Ill.: Can you suggest any resources in the Chicago area? Thanks.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Try the Chicago archdiocese. They have many programs, and can probably refer to a non-religious one if that is what you want.

Fairfax, Va.: Dr. Scuka,

I enjoy alone time--reading and playing computer games. My wife sees this period as me trying to avoid her. I view that as going to "the cave" to regroup. How can we find a balance?

Cheers!!

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Go to www.smartarrriages.com and track down Mark Gungor's "Laugh your Way to a Better Marriage." Find one in your area, and go! It will give each of you a different, and more humorous, take on your differences.

Washington, D.C.: Do you recommend counseling for couples that are contemplating marriage but are not engaged? My boyfriend and I have been together for 3 years and have talked about marriage a lot but he is not ready to commit. He's currently in counseling seeking to resolve his commitment issues and I'm wondering if we should also pursue couples' counseling.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Yes, I would recommend couples counseling to supplement his individual work. And you have to ask yourself: How long can I afford to wait for him to make up his mind?

There comes a point where it's either a go or it isn't.

Annandale, Va.: What type of counseling do you recommend for couples that have been married before? I have been married before and have 3 children and my boyfriend has never been married. We have been dating for 3 years and get along very well together. There are no major issues but I do know that things can develop when a new person enters a ready-made family. He is very willing to read books about step-parenting and seems very open to counseling before marriage. I just know I don't want to make the same mistakes twice and go through another divorce.

Thanks, Ann in Annandale

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: I strongly recommend a couples communication workshop and/or step family counseling. Any step family will inevitably have challenges, but they can be dealt with successfully, if one has assistance and learns some valuable perspectives. Good luck!

Rockville, Md.: I think premarital counseling can be a great help and it's nice to see good counselors committed to helping couples figure things out. My parents were involved in Catholic marriage preparation programs (it's nationwide but organized by diocese) for 15 years, and I was always amazed at the number of couples they would tell us about who simply had never thought to talk about if or how many kids they would have, how they would reconcile their faiths, etc. One aspect of that program: it involved married couples counseling engaged couples. In addition to more trained counselors, it can be helpful to talk just to couples who have already been there in successfully making their marriage work over time.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Yes, indeed. And there are some great marriage mentoring programs out there. Visit smartmarriages.com for some leads.

Virginia: Is someone always a cheater? I am in a situation where someone has been cheating on me for a year and has gotten busted. He says he is breaking up with the other woman and recommitting to me. Without condoning this, I can see that it would be attractive to a man who is a year out of a divorce with limited sexual experience to have two girlfriends. Everyone I have met who knows him said he never ever cheated on his ex. All of my friends are shocked that he had done this; he is remorseful about the hurt he has caused. The other woman, btw, knew about me a bit and knew he was seeing someone else which I also think was a bit of a factor. Yes, he is a rat but can rats change?

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: The question is not whether rats can change (anyone can change if they really want to), but have you so lost respect for him (since you refer to him as a rat) that there is

no real point? Maybe yes, maybe no. The only way to get a genuine answer in a case like this is through couples counseling. Good luck.

Ashburn, Va.: Hi Dr. Scuka,

I'd like your opinion on a situation that is rarely ever touched upon in pre-marital sessions.

My ex and I took the the mandatory pre-Cana classes required for a Catholic ceremony along with an additional couples mentoring program.

While they all covered various topics they are all geared to getting people through the "tough times." What I've seen is many marriages fall apart (including my own) when a couple has achieved some level of comfort financially, professionally and personally.

Now one seems to talk about this aspect of life.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Perhaps what was missing from the mix was "being a couple" and making that as much of a priority as anything else. "A word to the wise."

Philadelphia, Pa.: The earlier article mentioned a Catholic and a Jew who had not come to terms regarding the religion kids would be raised in. Shouldn't a choice of religion be made by each individual, and isn't a parents role to help children become responsible adults? My wife is Catholic and I am atheist. We agreed to do three things: expose our kids to the Catholic faith; teach strong and confident use of critical thinking skills; support our children in the beliefs they choose, regardless of what that is.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: I think that's great.

Washington, D.C.: My fiance and I both agree we are undecided about having children - but for the same reasons. Do you consider this agreement? Or are we headed for serious problems?

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: The big question for the two of you is: Can I genuinely imagine being happy in my life with either decision? If so, then you can probably navigate this issue together. If you have doubts, you may want to do some counseling to help each of you get to the deeper levels of ambivalence about having children. You might want to do this anyway.

Washington, D.C.: Regarding the "a relationship shouldn't be so much work" comment - I would

say that after 8 years of marriage and now with 3 small kids, then I never anticipated the kinds of conflicts we would have, because you can't really know how you will be as parents and as a family until you are. Having learned those skills before getting married really would have helped my husband and I. We had a year of counseling which really helped us with some difficult issues - issues that were minor annoyances while dating became huge once children were in the picture. It's really so different being two "independent" people in a couple and being a family and dealing with each others' families. Thanks for what you are doing. I think it's really needed.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: I'm sharing your comment because I think it gives pre-married couples a realistic take on what married life often involves. Thanks for writing.

Northern Virginia: Do you think that your weekend session can be helpful to a couple married over 30 years who have seemingly settled into avoidance and ignoring each other?

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Yes.

Long Distance/Overseas Romance: I'm getting married to someone with whom I've had a overseas/LD relationship with for almost 2 years (US-Africa). He has all the qualities I want (communication, conflict resolution, values, temperament) and we focus a lot effort on getting to know each other on as many diff levels as we can given the distance.

Currently we are almost daily communication (phone/email/IM). He will be moving to the US soon and I'd like to think of some things we can do to transition from a LDR into an in-person relationship.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Attend a weekend workshop together to get better grounded in solid communication skills. Good luck!

Charlotte, N.C.: Do you recommend the children of previous marriages be included in pre-marital counseling?

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Possibly. If there are major conflicts. But starting as a couple can be a good idea, because the two of you getting on the same page is perhaps the most important thing.

Arlington, Va.: I have been engaged for a year, getting married in September. We have attended Engaged Encounters through the Diocese of Maryland. My fiance and I agree on all the major issues (kids, money, where to live) except for my career choice. I have been moving towards a

career in law enforcement (I come from a family of cops), which she views as too dangerous and is protesting profusely. My question is, while my marriage is my most important priority, I have always wanted to work in law enforcement since long before I knew her and I know I will be miserable in my current career (accountant) if I do not change. Where do I draw the line between my personal happiness and maintaining peace in our marriage? I have tried to be reassuring and provide her with an honest assessment of the job, but I feel like she won't even listen to me. I know her fear is of the unknown, and I know she knows that this is very important to me, I just can't figure out how to strike a balance between my goals and her fears.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: This is a potentially tough issue. I recommend counseling for the two of you to work this through.

DC area marriage prep leader: Thanks for bringing the importance of learning skills to the attention of couples.

I notice that many couples are asking questions about compatibility--for example above someone mentioned agreeing about finances and you mentioned religion.

We feel that couples really need to understand that while there are some issues that they need to agree about (e.g., kids) and it's nice to be 'compatible' about more, it's unrealistic to expect to be and remain compatible on a lot of issues: There's always one partner who is neater, one who is more stressful communication tolerant, one who has a higher sex drive, one who is more of a spender, etc.

It's so important to learn how to MANAGE these differences skillfully--not expect there to be few difference (or especially to resent these).

Thanks.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Indeed. Thanks for writing

Arlington, Va.: We have been married 10 years! We solve problems and talk it all out well. Except now he is unhappy about my body. I have been working out for 1 year and have gotten thin, but my problem area is the last thing to go no matter what. He is unhappy and thinks I must do major effort for that one problem area, enough for physical transformation. He is turned off about it. What can I possibly do now?

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Ask him if he genuinely loves you as you are.

Virginia: The biggest problem among couples are ex-boyfriend and ex-girlfriends. Among my guys friends (yes macho men talk), our biggest gripes is the former boyfriends. Our wives think it is nothing...

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Are good boundaries being maintained, and is the present relationship being treated with respect for it and for your feelings? Flip side: Are you being overly controlling?

Baltimore, Md.: Good Afternoon, Dr. Scuka

Thanks for taking my question.

Last September, I met a wonderful man, and we've been dating ever since. However, at the same time, I was also seeing a man that I knew was in a relationship with another woman. We saw each other strictly for sex and maybe once in a while, you might call it companionship; but I'm trying to keep it real.

I was honest with this new man, and told him what I was doing. He didn't like it and told me that I should stop seeing him if I wanted to keep our relationship healthy (how can you not like a person that puts it to you like that). It has taken me a while to end my affair and my new guy is getting upset because I have not yet ended it. I'm afraid that when I do end this affair, my new true love will leave me because he'll think that if I saw two men once, I'll do it again...and that's not true.

How do I convince him that I want our relationship to work (we've spoke of living together and somewhat touched on marriage, which I'm all for)?

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Can you say to yourself in all honesty that you are being fair to your "new man"? His feelings are telling you that you are not. I would recommend individual counseling to uncover the deep fears that are driving your behavior. I would recommend couples counseling to see whether the two of you can have a future together.

Robert Scuka, Ph.D.: Thank you one and all for your questions.

Rob Scuka

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