

A COMPREHENSIVE AND INTENSIVE APPROACH TO RECONCILING MARITAL CONFLICT

By Judy A. Dabler¹

Introduction

Anyone who attempts to assist couples experiencing conflict knows this: there are no relational disputes quite like marital conflict. The stakes are high when a couple faces marital distress—to the couple, the family, and the community at large. Marital conflict creates spiritual, emotional, relational, and financial costs that often span several generations.

Clergy, counselors, and lay leaders in the church are frequently the first responders when a couple begins to suffer from marital discord. The interest in preventing marital conflict, and eventual marital dissolution, extends beyond the church; governmental efforts promote and fund couples' relationship education in an attempt to reduce the negative effects of marital dissolution on children and adults. (Halford, Markman, and Stanley 2008, 498)

While many helpers have been daunted by the task of assisting conflicted couples in resolving their differences, Schneewind and Gerhard, citing several recent research studies, state that “one of the success stories in couple research is that intervention, especially preventive intervention, works—at least for a respectable number of couples.” (Schneewind and Gerhard 2002, 69)

Extensive writing and research for the past several decades has focused on helping couples survive the challenges of conflict. Yet, with the divorce rate estimated between

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40% and 50% for all new marriages², the question remains: How can we better help conflicted couples resolve their conflicts and restore their relationships? An improved approach to dealing with marital conflict would more effectively prevent the damage of conflict and the devastation of divorce. Diverging from the traditional therapeutic approach, this article highlights the need to respond to marital conflict in a more intensive and comprehensive way. In addition, this article describes an intensive and comprehensive process to facilitate marital reconciliation and restoration, referred to as the “R&R” approach, developed and utilized by Live at Peace Ministries (“LAPM”)³. Finally, several key obstacles to making these R&R services effective and available will be highlighted.

Compelling Reasons to Deal with Marital Conflict

Marital conflict is unique in many ways. Research abundantly reports that “marital distress and, in particular, destructive marital conflict are major generic risk factors for many forms of dysfunction and psychopathology.” (Stanley et al. 1995, 392) Adults who have endured high-conflict marriages struggle from depression, health concerns, employment-related issues, and have an increased risk for divorce in subsequent marriages. Children who grow up in homes with marital discord or divorce have a significantly higher risk for conduct disorders, anxiety, depression, and juvenile delinquency. (Stanley et al. 1995, 392) Although recent

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, National Vital Statistics Report, Volume 58, Number 25, August 27, 2010, http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr58/nvsr58_25.pdf.

³ LAPM is a reconciliation ministry headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri, and is a not-for-profit Christian organization that specializes in responding to marital and family conflict whose approach emphasizes both reconciliation and restoration as two separate but connected aspects of resolving marital conflict (www.liveatpeace.org). The R&R approach developed and offered by LAPM relies heavily on the principles of Christian conciliation and the mediation method promoted by Peacemaker Ministries.

research cautiously suggests that some children may benefit when their parents' high-conflict marriage dissolves, the evidence overwhelmingly supports the notion that children are always better off when living in low-conflict homes, especially when their parents' marriage remains intact. (Morrison and Coiro 1999, 634-635)

Most people have directly experienced or indirectly witnessed the cost of divorce. Churches committed to reducing this cost may require premarital counseling in an attempt to prevent future marital breakdown. Premarital counseling that relies on the comparatively intensive Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program ("PREP") has been shown to provide "clear, early advantages relative to those couples receiving more traditional premarital services." (Stanley et al. 2001, 73) In addition, researchers have concluded that PREP has been shown to be effective when offered by clergy and lay leaders. (Stanley et al. 2001, 73)

Marital breakdown profoundly impacts families on a financial level. As a result, public policy makers have expressed concern over the state of the family for many years and have been instrumental in initiating both voluntary and mandated mediation as viable and effective alternative dispute processes which minimize the psychological damage caused by conflict and the negative financial impact on families. (Malia et al. 1995, 19) Yet, despite widespread concern about marital conflict and well-intentioned efforts to deal with it, the flood of divorce cases seems unabated. Couples need greater and more effective efforts to reduce the high cost of marital conflict and dissolution.

Unique Nature of Marital Conflict

Why is marital conflict so damaging? Why is marital conflict perceived to be

more difficult to address than other types of conflict? The marital relationship itself provides insight into the answers. The more intimate the relationship between two people, the more painful and damaging the distress or dissolution of the relationship is for all involved.

Divorce often constitutes a dramatic transformation of a close, personal, and usually harmonious relationship into one that is deeply antagonistic and bitter. Explanations among family researchers typically focus on opposing material interests, the adversarial nature of the legal system, latent or manifest conflict in marriage, or psychological reactions to the pain of divorce. (Hopper 2001, 430)

When marital conflict drives a couple toward divorce, other related marital disputes increase the damage experienced in marital conflict, “including property disputes, verbal fights, custody battles, kidnappings, noncooperation with court orders, burglaries, physical threats and violence, property destruction, name calling, harassment, and stalking.” (Hopper 2001, 430) These related disputes often involve people outside the marriage, elevating the painful embarrassment and shame of the couple and their children. In addition, increased financial, emotional, and time resources are needed to deal with the realities of these associated disputes. Initial conflicts compound as issues increase and the parties’ energies are spent.

There is another reason for the unusually damaging and difficult nature of marital disputes: the symbolic or cultural significance of marriage. Hopper states that, though this is one of the most significant issues in divorce-related conflict, it remains largely ignored. (Hopper 2001, 430) Many couples view marriage as a sacred institution binding each spouse to a life-long commitment. Couples with stronger religious views more highly regard and strongly emphasize the sacred nature of their bond. When the marriage ends, especially a marriage founded on a shared Christian faith, the couple must renegotiate the previous value and significance placed on the marriage relationship. This renegotiation often results in a redefinition of the marital

relationship as well as the marriage partner. Hopper describes the mental gymnastics of spouses well:

To resolve the (marital) problem, they undo the previous meanings of their marriages: initiators of divorce come to see their marriages as having been not true marriages from the start, so efforts to preserve their marriages seem absurd; noninitiating partners come to see their spouses as having deceived them, so efforts to negotiate a divorce seem rife with lies. (Hopper 2001, 431)

The research behind Hopper's statement shows that a significant number of spouses who initiate divorce go on to redefine the marriage covenant in an attempt to resolve the dissonance created by their decision to separate. (Hopper 2001, 435) In order to nullify the sacred, those initiating divorce move beyond complaints about the marriage to "assert that their marriages had, in fact, not been 'real' marriages at all" and subsequently "the sacred was not really violated, for there was nothing sacred to begin with." (Hopper 2001, 437)

Marriage partners who are forced into unwanted divorce proceedings may strongly oppose efforts to dissolve the marital union, surprising and disappointing the spouse desiring to leave the marriage. The divorcing spouse then concludes that the opposition toward divorce makes no sense, and is, in fact, "bizarre." (Hopper 2001, 438) The focus then shifts from redefining the marital relationship to redefining the marital partner. Hopper shows that spouses seeking divorce often redefine their partners as "crazy" since their efforts to save "the marriage that never was" seem strangely unnecessary, a result of some form of denial.

The spouse forced unwillingly into divorce responds similarly to the partner divorcing them. Injured by the words "I wasn't honest with you about what I felt" or "I haven't loved you for a long time," the frustrated spouse responds by redefining their departing spouse as a liar who pretended to be one thing while actually being another. (Hopper 2001, 440) When

spouses redefine each other, the resulting hurt and anger fuels their sense of justification for remaining locked in destructive conflict, even to their own and their children's detriment.

How to Help Reconcile Marital Conflict

There are many interventions available to help couples in distress. Numerous websites offer constructive information about the nature of marital conflict and steps to ameliorate it. Books on marriage abound. Conferences and workshops targeting married couples interested in learning new ways of relating to one another are increasingly offered by religious and non-religious organizations. Pastoral counseling and therapy, both within and apart from the church, are easily accessible and commonly utilized. While prevention programs are more available than ever before, conflict remains. Still, "the primary method of helping couples is to treat relationship problems after they have become severe enough for the couple to seek therapy, usually after there have been negative effects on spouses and children." (Stanley et al. 1995, 392) Counseling for conflicted couples, in light of the divorce rate, seems less effective than desired.

Though preventative treatment is valuable, helpers are confronted with the need for wise intervention options *after* conflict has surfaced and become a threat to the marriage. The R&R approach includes a blend of counseling, conciliation, and education services. This comprehensive and intensive approach involves church resources, which both increases the effectiveness of the intervention and helps reduce the overall financial cost associated with direct services. (Hawkins et al. 2008, 724) The higher the financial cost associated with any type of marital interventions, the less likely it is that couples will access needed resources for relational change.

The Reason for Intensive Services

The fact that marriages are failing at an astonishing rate, despite easily accessible help, suggests that a different type of assistance may be needed. The philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the psychotherapeutic help currently available to conflicted couples often negatively influence the value of the services offered. The length of counseling sessions, for instance, is frequently less than one hour. In highly conflicted cases, the short session does little more than open a painful and infected wound. Financially, most mental health coverage does not provide reimbursement for the cost of couples counseling. Fees for services are often more than \$100 per hour, and the lack of health care reimbursement significantly impacts couples' ability to afford the services. Furthermore, the focus of psychotherapeutic interventions promote insight and understanding, but lack the necessary structures to facilitate the deep spiritual, relational, cognitive, and emotional change necessary to restore conflicted marriages.

As service providers recognize that the traditional therapeutic format lacks the ability to intervene fully in marital conflict, intensive marital services have become increasingly available. Many service providers recognize that the intensive format, often involving many hours per day over the course of several days, has a unique advantage over the traditional therapeutic model. Weekend retreats and week-long group therapy programs are being offered in both church and secular settings. The financial cost of these programs is presumably lower over time than the costs encountered through divorce or therapy. Yet, through trial and error, it has become equally evident that intensive services that do not address the conflict comprehensively (e.g. focusing on spiritual growth, developing relational skills, and building a community-based

support system), may do little more than prolong the inevitable dissolution of a conflicted marriage. An effective approach to reconciling marital conflict would include establishing support structures and utilizing a collaborative team to provide the variety of services needed to promote, spiritual, personal and relational transformation over an extended period of time.

Theological Commitments

The R&R approach used to help conflicted and distressed couples holds to certain theological commitments as summarized by Ken Sande and presented in *The Peacemaker*. (Sande 2004, 287-288) First and foremost, the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is central to effective reconciliation services. The message, methods and manner of counseling, conciliation and education services rest on the redemptive message of salvation through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

An effective R&R approach also respects the local church as possessing the ecclesiastical authority and responsibility for shepherding and caring for its members. Anyone receiving R&R services should sign an informed consent that authorizes service providers to speak with the pastors or elders of the couple's local church, and these appropriate church leaders should be invited to participate in the R&R services provided to conflicted couples. Conflicted couples considering separation or divorce should be required to meet with their pastor and gain written consent before proceeding with a marital mediation. If the need for church discipline arises, the church alone is authorized to determine the need for and provide redemptive discipline.

Biblical counseling, conciliation, and education services are all parts of a

comprehensive and intensive R&R approach for couples in conflict. The need for counseling that relies on the Word of God and addresses the deepest issues of the heart (e.g., attitudes, actions, motivations, and convictions) is fundamentally upheld as a distinctive of an R&R process. Transformation, as outlined in Ephesians 4:22-24, is a process of change that necessarily includes the deeper transformation of heart attitudes, convictions and beliefs while also working toward behavioral change. Couples engaging an R&R process are graciously encouraged to consider the relevant and abundant instruction in Scripture pertaining to marriage, conflict, and the many underlying causes of conflict.

The R&R approach rests on the principle that marriage as an institution created by God and is meant to be life-long. As a result, marriage is a primary human relationship designed for God's glory. All R&R interventions strive to assist conflicted marriage partners to live together in a God-honoring way.

A biblical view of marriage calls for R&R service providers to develop a sound theological position on separation and divorce to guide decision making about whether or not to engage in reconciliation processes where divorce is being considered. Christian counselors and conciliators should not speak to whether or not a divorce is "biblical," but defer to church leaders to make ecclesiastical decisions regarding the nature of a divorce. Some R&R service providers may choose to withdraw from providing services to a couple if the church's or couple's position on divorce compromises their ability to promote reconciliation. For instance, if both spouses have agreed to pursue divorce, and the church has not determined that the couple is permitted to divorce, service providers might choose to defer from taking the case if at least one member of the marital union is not committed to pursuing reconciliation.

Philosophical Commitments

The R&R approach rests upon philosophical concerns unique to the disciplines of counseling, conciliation, and education. All counselors and conciliators offering R&R services hold certain presuppositions that impact the helping process, presuppositions often informed by psychological and educational theory. Gospel-centered service providers should seek to evaluate their assumptions critically against the timeless truth of Scripture.

Educational theorists describe community-based learning as a non-formal learning opportunity “in which the needs and interests of the participants are paramount in the encounter.” (Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner 2007, 30) Merriam et al. state that the usual goal of community-based learning initiatives is to improve the well-being of some part of the social community. (Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner 2007, 61) Overall participation in non-formal learning has increased far more rapidly than participation in formal learning environments, often as a response to the lower associated costs and the greater flexibility of learning. (Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner 2007, 61) The R&R approach encourages community-based learning through church and parachurch organizations (e.g., Bible Study Fellowship, Celebrate Recovery, and Men’s Fraternity) which are usually low-cost alternatives available in the couple’s immediate vicinity.

When addressing serious marital conflict, the goal is to see individuals learn and change in a way that transforms the marital relationship. Individual growth includes change from a self-centered perspective to one that involves compassion and concern for others, usually involving the sharing of and listening to another’s story. (Daloz 1999, 145) Tisdell, another

educational theorist, maintains that transformative learning best occurs in community-based settings that allow for cognitive, emotional and relational exploration guided by culturally and spiritually sensitive educators. (Tisdell 2001, 14) In other words, telling one's story and listening compassionately to the story of your spouse, as prescribed in the mediation component of the R&R approach, all within the context of an authentic and loving Christian community, is a key component to changing a conflicted marital relationship.

The transformative process described by Daloz calls for the help of mentors who support and encourage new learning as well as critical reflection on personal convictions, attitudes, and actions.

“Effective mentors add value and moral content to the relationship. They inspire a sense of worthy purpose. For young adults in particular but also for older adults seeking a new direction, the mentor holds the promise of something greater, of a new, fuller, even *wiser* participation in the world.” (Daloz 1999, 244)

Adults who develop the capacity for and use critical reflection in dealing with painful marital conflict often experience real and lasting growth. Well-constructed R&R efforts include the opportunity for marriage partners to experience discipleship that promotes transformation through reconciliation with God and others.

R&R Methodology

The R&R process allows for a custom-designed approach that best suits the unique situation of the couple, and draws on counseling, conciliation, and education to meet the objective of reconciliation and restoration of trust, respect, and intimacy. There is considerable discussion in the reconciliation field about whether counseling should occur prior to or following mediation. Counseling, with its educational and individual focus, can provide a solid base of

understanding upon which to pursue reconciliation. The majority of couples served in an R&R process enter the process after first experiencing a period of individual or couple's counseling. Some couples enter the R&R process without having first undergone counseling, but may later seek counseling as a result of the mediation experience. Some family mediators report that mediation provides the opportunity to address serious conflict that might be unresponsive to traditional counseling and psychotherapy. (Kath 2007, 95) Mediation may actually enhance the overall effectiveness of subsequent counseling. Regardless of whether counseling occurs, the R&R process always includes conflict coaching prior to an actual mediation. Conflict coaching is a reconciliation service that facilitates the opportunity for learning, personal reflection and self-evaluation similar to counseling.

Primary Reconciliation Intervention

Generally, the primary reconciliation intervention for conflicted couples consists of a two- or three-day marital mediation embedded in a process of pre-mediation and post-mediation services. The mediation itself has two main areas of focus: reconciliation and restoration. Reconciliation necessarily requires repentance, confession and forgiveness on the part of both marriage partners, and restoration of trust, respect and intimacy necessarily requires a significant amount of reconciliation.

This primary reconciliation intervention ought to include an assessment process to determine the level of conflict in the marital relationship. Life Innovations PREPARE/ENRICH program⁴ is a statistically valid and easy-to-use assessment that allows the conciliator to

⁴ Use of the PREPARE/ENRICH assessment requires certification for the service provider; information about this

understand better the level of conflict and the specific areas of conflict. Adequate assessment is necessary to best design the intervention that best meets the couple’s needs, an approach that facilitates effective interventions. (Schneewind and Gerhard 2002, 69) In addition to assessment, the R&R approach includes pre-mediation case administration and conflict coaching (an educational program tailored to the individual’s needs that helps prepare the parties for effective participation in the mediation). The mediation follows the model taught in the Conflict Coaching & Mediation Training offered by Peacemaker Ministries⁵ and ends only after post-mediation follow-up. (See Table 1 and Appendix A)

Table 1. Phases and Stages of a Marital Mediation

<i>Phase I:</i> Intake	<i>Phase II:</i> Consultation	<i>Phase III:</i> Conflict Coaching	<i>Phase IV:</i> Mediation	<i>Phase V:</i> Follow-Up
<i>Stage 1:</i> Initial Intake	<i>Stage 1:</i> Initial Consultation	<i>Stage 1:</i> Pre-Coaching Administration	<i>Stage 1:</i> Pre-Mediation Administration	<i>Stage 1:</i> Teleconference
<i>Stage 2:</i> Mediation Intake	<i>Stage 2:</i> Final Consultation	<i>Stage 2:</i> Conflict Coaching	<i>Stage 2:</i> Mediation	<i>Stage 2:</i> Termination
		<i>Stage 3:</i> Non-Party Participant Preparation		

program and the certification process is available at www.prepare-enrich.com.

⁵ Peacemaker Ministries offers effective adult education programs designed to assist and equip Christians and their churches to respond to conflict biblically; information about Peacemaker Ministries is available at www.peacemaker.net.

Importance of Multiple Interventions

In *Hope Focused Marriage Counseling*, Worthington reports his findings of providing services to couples in conflict over many years. (Worthington 1999, xxxi-xxxv) Worthington found that interventions for conflicted couples that emphasized skills training in communication and conflict resolution immediately increased the marital satisfaction experienced by the couple. Over a period of time, however, the benefit of this training seemed to wear off and couples found themselves back to the same level of distress they experienced prior to the skills training intervention. When conflict and marital distress is low, marital satisfaction is generally high. When marital satisfaction is low, it is often because of conflict and distress.

Worthington also reports that skills training combined with an educational intervention to teach the principles of forgiveness slowed or reversed the inevitable decline in marital satisfaction as the gradual effects of forgiveness training was experienced. While forgiveness interventions showed no immediate change in the marriage relationship, the gradual increase in forgiveness and reduction in conflict increased marital satisfaction over time.

R&R service providers have observed results similar to Worthington's findings in working with conflicted couples. When couples receive only a single mediation intervention, most couples initially reported a favorable outcome. Unfortunately, the positive effect wears off, generally between two and four months following completion of the mediation event (Figure 1). The observations of R&R service providers differ slightly from Worthington in that when couples declined back to their original levels of dysfunction following an intervention, they were generally worse off. Finding themselves back to where they had once been, after their expectations had risen and significant resources had been invested into the reconciliation process

resulted in higher levels of disappointment, discouragement, and despair, which, if left unaddressed, moved couples closer to a divorce decision.

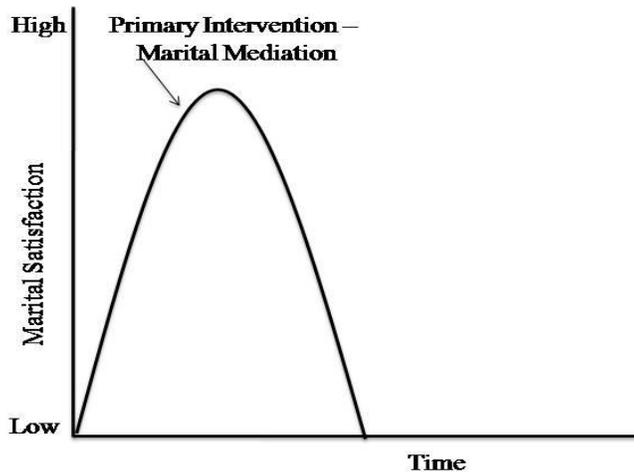


Figure 1. Primary Intervention Alone

With the encouragement and supervision of the service providers in the R&R process, the couple develops a restoration plan which includes multiple, ongoing interventions. This carefully considered and implemented restoration plan significantly improves marital reconciliation outcomes (Figure 2). R&R service providers, in line with Worthington's findings, believe that secondary interventions are best oriented around theological training on issues of forgiveness as well as other core doctrines (e.g., adoption, justification, sanctification). In addition, R&R service providers have found that theological instruction regarding idols of the heart, repentance, and faith also provides valuable opportunities to grow in spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity on the part of the marital partners is a key component in positive outcomes from reconciliation processes.

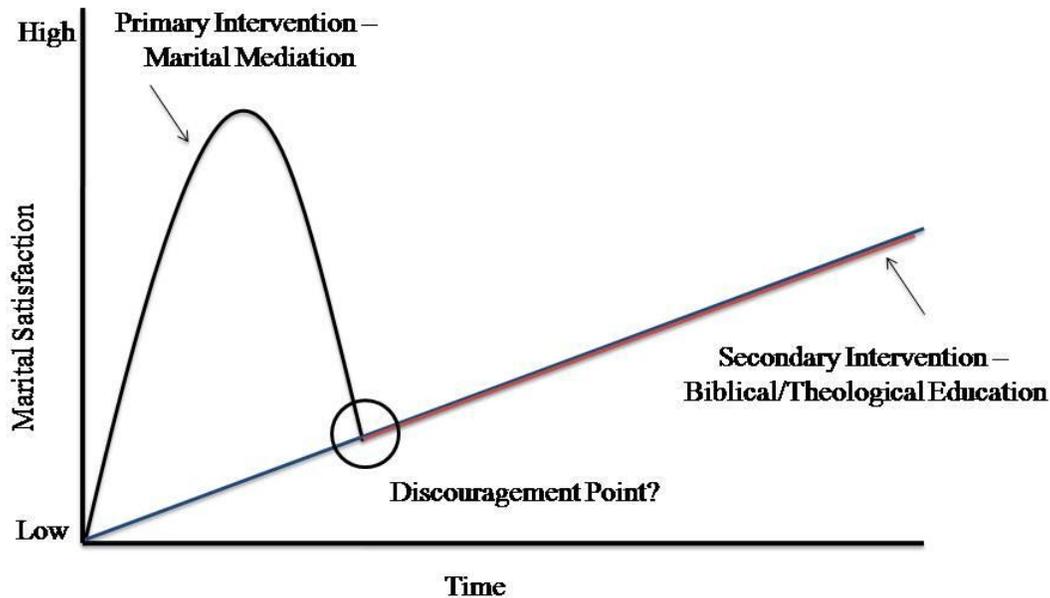


Figure 2. Primary and Secondary Interventions

Couples must understand the value of multiple interventions designed to enhance transformational learning to encourage their commitment to these important activities. It is necessary to schedule the initial secondary intervention (e.g., forgiveness education, etc.) very early in the R&R process and ideally before the primary intervention concludes. Forgiveness training ought to begin no later than the end of the marriage mediation, and well before couples reach the “point of discouragement.” The couple’s commitment and motivation to following the restoration plan decreases discouragement, which increases the possibility of lasting marital reconciliation and restoration. In discussing the need to enhance motivation and commitment in adults, Wlodkowski encourages service providers to develop a respectful relationship with the learner to promote a positive attitude toward the learning experience, enhance personal meaning

through challenging and thoughtful experiences, and encourage the realization that the learning has value and significance. (Wlodkowski 1999, 81) The point of discouragement is reached when the couple's marital satisfaction, following the primary intervention, declines to some lower than expected level. The R&R service provider relies on experience and careful monitoring to assess a couple's point of discouragement.

The ability to plan effective interventions and make helpful adjustments to the intervention framework comes through practice. According to Wlodkowski, these skills emerge after applying an intervention framework about six times. (Wlodkowski 1999, 321) The discouragement point for couples in an R&R process has been reached in as little as one week, or as long as one year following the primary marital mediation. When couples reach that sometimes difficult-to-predict point of discouragement, the energy and motivation needed to commit to a secondary intervention decreases as does the likelihood of the marital partner's commitment to future growth efforts.

Relationship restoration, especially in cases of severe marital conflict, often requires multiple, ongoing interventions. When trust and intimacy have been damaged as a result of serious, prolonged, and profound marital conflict, carefully designed ongoing interventions often produce lasting change. Coyle and Enright determined that longer healing times were needed when the interpersonal injury was greater, when the age of the wounded individual was older, and when the individual lacked the presence of a positive learning environment. (Coyle and Enright 1998, 236) Conflicted couples who experience greater pain, or pain for greater periods of time, likely require longer interventions to help them experience healing and freedom. An important early secondary intervention for such a couple should be a focused learning

program for building communication and conflict resolution skills. While introductory skills are taught during the primary intervention, skills training as part of ongoing interventions is more extensive and rigorous (Figure 3).

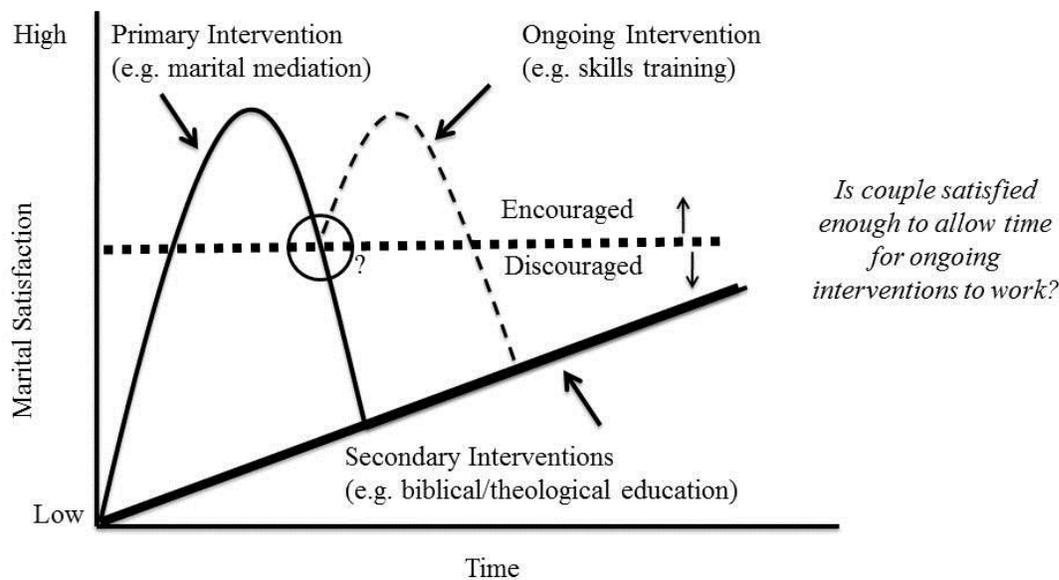


Figure 3. Primary, Secondary and Ongoing Interventions

Finally, high conflict couples engaged in an R&R process show evidence that there is great benefit from multiple secondary interventions that span an extended period of time (Figure 4). These multiple interventions can be tailored to meet the unique needs of the couple in distress, but should begin with an emphasis on communication and conflict resolution skill development. Common interventions that build on the communication and conflict resolution training include discipleship, mentoring, pastoral shepherding, counseling, and other educational programs.

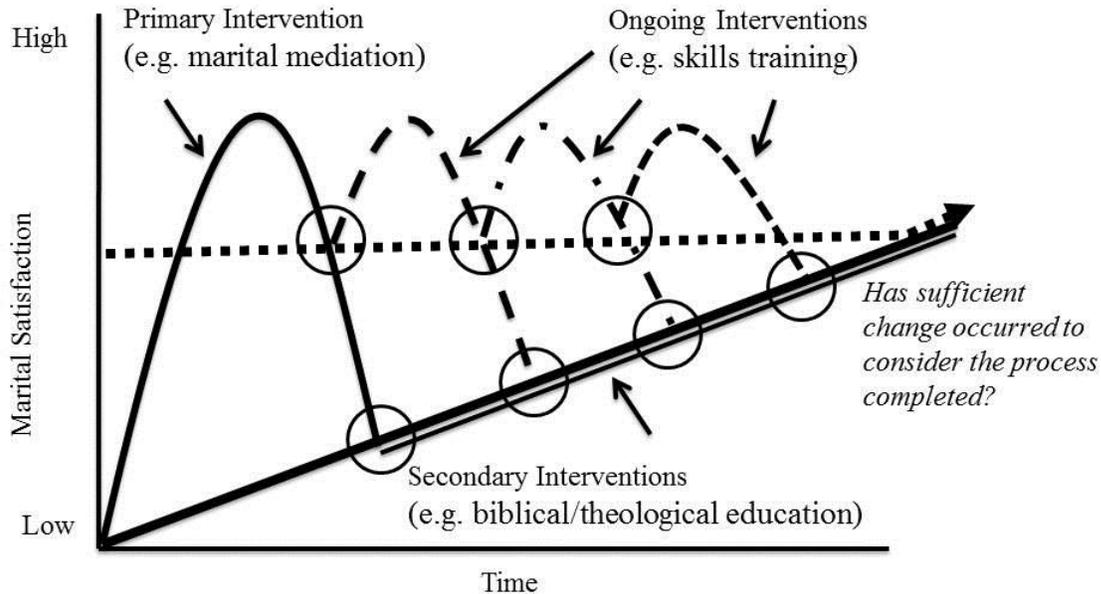


Figure 4. Primary, Secondary and Multiple Ongoing Interventions

A discipleship program (on an individual, group, or supervised basis), as well as one-on-one mentoring by a spiritually mature believer, often provides the ongoing emotional support needed for behavioral change to occur. Marital satisfaction is unlikely to occur without measurable behavioral change on the part of the marriage partners.

The R&R process assists couples in developing their own restoration plan which includes multiple, personalized interventions. The restoration plan forms part of the “Memorandum of Understanding” produced by the couple at the conclusion of the mediation. This Memorandum is a detailed chronology of the mediation process, an outline of issues deserving attention at a later date in another venue, the agreements reached during the mediation, and significant acknowledgments made by the marriage partners. The Memorandum also

outlines several recommended educational interventions proven to be helpful in facilitating relational reconciliation and restoration for married couples completing the primary mediation process.

Forgiveness Training

The secondary intervention in the R&R model almost always involves instruction on the topic of forgiveness. Coyle and Enright, in evaluating research studies on forgiveness, concluded that “all studies showed that participants who wish to forgive can be taught to do so.” (Coyle and Enright 2008, 235) While forgiveness was once remanded to theologians, educational psychology has increasingly given attention to this important topic over the past two decades. (Coyle and Enright 1998, 219) Empirical testimony shows the value of forgiveness. “Clinical experience and research findings indicate that forgiveness brings increased marital satisfaction.” (DiBlasio and Benda 2008, 150) While some authors promote unforgiveness as the healthy and positive goal for injured people, many other researchers maintain that forgiveness promotes physical and psychological well-being by reducing anger, anxiety, and depression and should be a significant aspect of any interpersonal reconciliation endeavor. (Legaree, Turner, and Loliss 2007, 198) Forgiveness education is critical to helping couples successfully resolve marital conflict and improve their marital satisfaction.

Definitions of forgiveness abound and many contributors to the topic disagree on how forgiveness should be understood. Coyle and Enright propose a clear and useful definition by claiming that “forgiveness may be defined as an interpersonal process whereby one individual, who was hurt by another’s injustice, chooses to abandon resentment rather than to

retaliate.” (Coyle and Enright 1998, 220) Pseudo-forgiveness involves “pardoning, condoning, forgetting, and/or denial” whereby the offender is deemed to have done nothing wrong. (Coyle and Enright 1998, 220) True forgiveness, however, is only necessary in the face of true injustice and is inconsistent with pardoning, condoning, forgetting and denial. Cheong and DiBlasio have written extensively about the Christian duty to forgive and have concluded that human forgiveness is not about forgiving sin *per se* (which is God’s prerogative alone), but involves a type of forgiveness that is an extension of Christlike love offered as a free gift from the offended to the offender. (Cheong and DiBlasio 2007, 21-22) Love powerfully heals broken marriages, and forgiveness is a necessary element of that redemptive love. The literature on the topic of forgiveness and reconciliation over the past decade has produced a significant amount of high quality work, in both Christian and secular settings.

Secondary interventions promote a deeper understanding of biblical forgiveness by encouraging couples to read theologically-sound books on forgiveness under the supervision of a personal mentor. In some cases, the conflicted couple will return for ongoing conflict coaching or counseling. The coach or counselor involved will process the forgiveness material with the couple and help facilitate forgiveness decisions.⁶

Ongoing Multiple Interventions

Ongoing interventions are intended to be educational in nature, although follow-up marital mediations may be appropriate for couples experiencing complex conflict. Ongoing

⁶LAPM is in the process of developing an educational approach similar to the thirteen step forgiveness intervention described and tested by DiBlasio and Benda as a corollary to the secondary intervention element of the R&R process. (DiBlasio and Benda 2008, 151)

interventions in the R&R approach help build relational stability and increase marital quality through growth in communication skills, but in a more cost-effective manner than counseling. Hawkins et al. studied 117 different marriage and relationship education programs and found that they were effective in enhancing relationship quality and improving communication skills, and that this effectiveness did not decline over time. (Hawkins et al. 2008, 725-728)

Other ongoing interventions in the R&R approach often span one year following the primary marital mediation intervention. As mentioned previously, the first of these ongoing interventions involve brief, focused training in communication skills and conflict resolution skills. The format and intensity of the couple's relationship education (CRE) training is generally consistent with Halford et al.'s conclusion that "the effects on sustaining relationship satisfaction and stability increase when CRE is increased to involve at least 10–12 hours of contact, but there seems to be limited additional benefit from further CRE program hours." (Halford, Markman, and Stanley 2008, 501) Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) is an excellent communication and conflict resolution training opportunity for conflicted couples and is available by specially trained individuals in most regions of the United States. PREP also provides a quality training program for service providers.

Church-based peacemaking teams offering the Small Group Peacemaking Study also provide an excellent resource for couples to continue their learning about communication and conflict resolution. Books can be helpful in educating couples about the basics of communication and conflict resolution, but the ability to process the information within a loving Christian community makes the learning experience more effective and applicable. Couples who follow through with communications and conflict resolution training show a markedly improved

outcome as a result of their participation in the R&R process.

Other secondary interventions that have proven effective for conflicted couples include pastoral shepherding, individual mentoring, personal or group discipleship, and individual learning programs. Bible Study Fellowship and the Navigators provide excellent group discipleship experiences at little or no cost. Several churches and seminaries offer on-line discipleship courses free to everyone. Many individuals who have experienced transformation through the reconciliation process choose to pursue training in biblical peacemaking, with a desire and intent to use their newfound skills to serve others struggling in high-conflict marriages.

The FamilyLife conferences and small group studies are highly recommended because the information provided in these venues targets the same key learning areas needed for conflicted couples to further their personal growth and change in a safe and encouraging environment. Couples are encouraged to attend FamilyLife's Weekend to Remember within six months following the completion of the primary intervention.

Finally, many couples benefit from individual and couples' counseling as an important secondary, ongoing intervention. Issues of abuse and neglect can provide a level of complexity and difficulty when working with conflicted couples that respond well to the traditional therapeutic approach as a corollary to the R&R process.

Obstacles to Helping Couples in Conflict

Many couples in conflict are unaware that reconciliation services are available in their community. While Peacemaker Ministries has done much to advance awareness in churches

about the benefits of conflict coaching and mediation, and have trained thousands of individuals to provide services, Christian conciliation is not well known. Secular mediation is a better known alternative dispute resolution process available to couples, but is generally geared for divorcing couples who are further down the road of bitter conflict. Secular mediators are most often trained to provide services to facilitate divorce rather than reconciliation.

Another obstacle to helping couples in conflict involves the cost of mediation services. While much more cost effective than litigation, mediation is not without its own costs. Mediations range in cost between \$2,000 and \$8,000, a price too steep for many to afford. Christian mediation is generally less expensive, but even then, the costs can amount to several thousands of dollars. R&R service providers who work in partnership with several local churches committed to biblical conflict resolution find that these partner churches often help offset some or all of the cost of reconciliation services for their members.

Even when Christian conciliation is available to conflicted couples needing assistance, church-based mediators and conflict coaches are often unaware of the particular difficulties involved with marital conflict. The outcomes of peacemaking team efforts are at times less than encouraging when dealing with highly conflicted couples facing complex issues. R&R service providers who work collaboratively with professional counselors and conciliators who have significant training and experience in working with conflicted couples may improve their mediation and educational efforts.

Another obstacle for couples needing reconciliation services involves general misunderstanding on the part of the couple that causes them to be reluctant to seek help. Most conflicted Christian marriage partners understand the biblical requirement to forgive their

spouses. However, many believers mistakenly think that forgiveness places a burden on the forgiver to return to the relationship without any consequences. They misunderstand the difference between the commandment to forgive, the commandment to do all that one can to pursue reconciliation of relationships (which requires repentance, confession and forgiveness on the part of both spouses), and the notion of rebuilding trust and intimacy toward restoring the marriage. When the issues of forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration are confused, parties are often reluctant to begin a process that they believe will force them back into a relationship they do not want or is not productive.

Another obstacle to couples seeking help for conflict involves previous experience with some type of preventative (pre-marital counseling) or interventive (counseling or therapy) assistance. When previous attempts to seek help have met with poor results, couples are less likely to seek out reconciliation services when conflict reaches unmanageable levels. In addition, many organizations will not assist couples to reconcile their differences when physical or domestic violence has occurred. (Malia et al. 1995, 23) Churches may be reluctant to get involved when physical harm has been inflicted by one or both of the marital partners. Domestic violence is frequently associated with high levels of conflict, and is well suited to being addressed in a comprehensive and intensive program. Outside resources and support groups, such as those built in to the R&R process, are particularly effective in bringing about true and lasting behavioral change, even when serious issues like violence are present.

Finally, discouragement and disappointment are huge obstacles to couples seeking help for reconciling marital conflict. When couples have previously sought help and experienced *positive* outcomes, they may experience higher levels of disappointment as those positive

outcomes have diminished. The “wearing off effect” is a well documented reality in working with married couples.

Conclusion

Despite the dismal outlook for marriages in today’s society, real help is available. Community and church organizations continue to benefit from lessons learned in their efforts to serve conflicted couples with the aim of preventing divorce. Excellent resources are increasingly available, and creative new approaches are being developed. As service providers consider the ideas presented in this paper, perhaps many will be encouraged to expand their efforts into a more comprehensive, intensive and effective helping model. The battle for marriages is worth fighting.

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