

*PreEngaged*

*So, You Want  
to be a Fiancée?*



*How pre-engagement  
counseling can change your life*

BY ERIC & HEATHER VIETS

# So, You Want to be a Fiancée?

How pre-engagement counseling can change your life

by Eric and Heather Viets

SAMPLE

Published by Eric and Heather Viets

Visit the website of Eric and Heather Viets at <http://preengaged.com> for the latest news, book details, and other information

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Eric and Heather Viets are relationship coaches, not licensed counselors. 'Pre-engagement counseling' and 'premarital counseling' are phrases commonly used to describe these relational investigative processes; however, we clearly indicate here that the services we render and products we create are a result of relationship coaching and not professional or licensed counseling. All consumers of our services and products (hereafter, Clients) acknowledge that any teaching, advice, or coaching we administer is *not* to be used as a substitute for professional advice by legal, medical, financial, business, spiritual or other qualified professionals. Clients are responsible for seeking independent professional guidance for legal, medical, financial, business, spiritual or other matters, if needed. Clients also understand and acknowledge that all decisions are exclusively the Client's and that any decisions and actions regarding them are the sole responsibility of the Client. To view the agreement for the use of any services or products delivered by PreEngaged, please go to: <http://preengaged.com/counseling-services/agreement>.

*Dedication:* Dedicated to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – may what we teach glorify Your Image. Thank you to Dr. Gene Mastin for teaching us and allowing us to use The PAIR Test with our clients – it is an amazing tool which is helping couples make wise spousal decisions – as well as to Dr. Scott Hawkins, thank you both for spending the time to supervise us in our graduate counseling practicum and internship.

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Last, but not least, this book is also to our family, friends, former teachers/professors, and clients (both past and future) – we will keep pressing on to help couples choose spouses with wisdom and understanding as well as help couples prepare well for (and continue well in) marriage. We thank you for telling others about us so that we may serve more people!

Heather also thanks the people above as well as: Dave and Betty Marshall (thank you for mentoring me and modeling a godly marriage), Lillie "Granny" Jones (thank you for your prayers and for being a model of the Proverbs 31 wife – looking forward to our Heavenly reunion), and to the rest of my family and friends for your prayers, encouragement, and honesty throughout the years.

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# Introduction

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Until a few years ago, the concept of pre-engagement counseling was not a part of my life at all. As a psychology student, I looked forward to the day when I could help married couples work through their problems and achieve thriving marriages. At that time, marriage didn't seem all that hard. All I thought I needed to be an effective marriage counselor was a little bit of knowledge and a lot of passion for the sanctity of marriage. This attitude is not uncommon for a young, naïve, unmarried psychology student who wants to make a difference in others' lives.

My friend Eric, who later became my husband, was also a psychology student dreaming of helping couples create thriving marriages; but, he was interested in counseling couples on the premarital side of matrimony. His reason? He read a study which stated preventative care was far cheaper and four times more effective in generating a healthy relationship than the work it takes to heal an unhealthy marriage. Up until that point, I had not weighed the idea of premarital counseling being a marriage saver. It just seemed like something people did so they would have some idea of how to co-exist with their mates – and something they did so the minister would agree to perform the wedding ceremony.

After several years of coaching pre-engagement and premarital couples (and several years of marriage), I have come to realize just how valuable pre-marriage counseling is to the health of an upcoming union. Sure, there are multitudes of couples who met, married, and lived happy lives together without receiving pre-marriage counseling; however, I would wager that most of these couples had to learn many lessons the hard way.

What was our history with pre-marriage counseling? Well, we went through a premarital class together even before we became romantically involved (since we loved relationships so much) and we received mentoring from a precious couple in the church we were attending at the time; yet, we did not go through an extensive premarital program with relationship coaches. At the time, we did not know how valuable such counseling would be, but after our first few years of marriage and learning countless lessons the hard way, we wished that we had gained the knowledge and wisdom of a couple far more experienced in the realities of married life. So, when Eric and I began counseling couples who were considering marriage, we created our curriculum based on what we wished we had been taught before we got married. Our pain is your gain. ~smile~

## **Should You Be Reading This Book?**

If you are single and in the process of waiting for your future spouse to come on the scene, we can't recommend heartily enough to begin preparing for marriage now.

If you are dating or courting and you and your sweetheart are trying to decide whether or not you should move forward to engagement, this book is definitely for you!

If you are already engaged, this book will still present a number of issues which will help you in your relationship and you can also benefit from our years of pre-engagement and premarital counseling in these pages.

If you are married, you're still in good company. About 20% of our website visitors are married people. Whether a couple is dating, engaged, or married, good relationship principles are applicable at any stage of the relationship. (And couples who married who never went through pre-engagement or premarital counseling may want to consider going through it even now – you can still learn a lot for your future!)

Eric and I have different roles within PreEngaged. He's largely the public voice and I'm largely the written voice. Though this book is written (and spoken ~smile~) primarily in my voice, we have both been thoroughly involved in the creation of this book. *Thank you* for purchasing this book – we worked hard to create it for you.

If you are in the dating or courting stage of your relationship, we do hope you will choose to pursue pre-engagement (or premarital, for you engaged couples!) counseling before taking the marital step. Even if your relationship is moving along with no obvious problems, we believe all couples can benefit from spending some focused time learning more about each other, learning about the ins and outs of married life, and working through underlying relational difficulties. And as long as you're considering... we would love to work with you (<http://www.preengaged.com/counseling>)! In our counseling, we aim to help couples obtain more knowledge about themselves and each other than many married couples obtain in a few years of marriage.

**So, what can you expect from this book? There are three main areas:**

1. This book will help you understand what to expect in pre-engagement counseling.
2. This book will explain why pre-engagement counseling will be a blessing to your future marriage.
3. This book will cover some topics which are important to discuss prior to engagement.

We wish you all the best in your pursuit of a healthy, happy, God-honoring marriage!  
Let's dive in...

# Chapter 1

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## What is "Pre-Engagement Counseling" and Why Should I Care?

Until a few years ago, I'd never heard of pre-engagement counseling. Everybody knows that you get counseling *after* getting engaged, right? That was always my understanding of the process! Boy meets girl. Boy and girl have a fantasy romance. Boy proposes to girl. Girl cries and says, "YES!" Then, boy and girl seek out premarital counseling to prepare for their lifetime of love. Sounds good, right?

Unfortunately, too many couples who begin their relationships in a tingly whirlwind of emotion find it hard to transition into the realities of living life devoted to someone else. The premarital relationship, though a lot of fun and very exhilarating, does not inherently prepare couples for married life.

Before Eric and I moved from the "just friends" stage of our relationship into the "seriously considering marriage" stage, we went through pre-engagement counseling without realizing it. We were both undergraduate students and one of the campus pastors was teaching a premarital class for engaged couples. Eric and I both had a passion for marriage and, even though we were only just friends at the time, wanted to go through the class so we could learn more about the process couples go through in preparing for marriage. Plus, we hoped to pick up some counseling tips we could use when we started counseling others.

The tickets were fifteen dollars, which paid for a book ([Learning to Live with the Love of your Life... and Loving It!](#) by Neil Clark Warren) and some printed materials. Neither of us predicted how awkward it would actually be for us joining a group of lovey dovey couples who were mere months, or even weeks, away from their wedding dates. The campus pastor came around to each table passing out materials and, as anyone would've assumed, he verbally pegged Eric and I as an engaged couple. You can imagine what was going through his mind when we responded, "We're just friends!" If I recall correctly, I think he just grunted something like, "Yeah, right..." and continued with the class (but, at the time, it was true! ~smile~).

Looking back on that weekend premarital class, I am so glad Eric and I had the chance to experience a premarital program before we reached the "I don't think I can live without you" stage of our relationship. Unfortunately, as we were just friends at the time, we were not taking the class as a way of considering a future together ourselves. We simply wanted to learn more about marriage and how to counsel others.

In retrospect, I wish Eric and I had been given the chance to receive wise counsel after we became a couple, but before we got engaged. Unlike most couples, we spent a lot of time together as friends with no romantic inclinations before we realized that we loved each other and wanted to move into a romantic, marriage-bound relationship. Like many couples, we swept through the romantic stage and became engaged without any counsel. We knew we

wanted to get married and, quite frankly, it never occurred to us to seek counseling before getting engaged. Every couple I knew that received counsel prior to marriage did so *after* the proposal. Those who know me would agree that if something has often been done a specified way, I usually don't stop and ask, "Is there a better way?"

Thankfully, not everyone is satisfied with the status quo. When Eric and I were in our Marriage and Family Therapy graduate school internship, we were given permission to contact the student body and offer free premarital counseling so we could complete our necessary hours. We were under professional supervision still, but working with the population we had a heart for.

We received responses from a number of engaged couples, but we also received a few responses from dating couples who were considering engagement. What we found when we counseled engaged couples was this: *an intense determination to keep the relationship together no matter what issues existed*. These couples were in the midst of wedding planning. Invitations were ready to go out (or already sent). Churches had been booked. Cakes had been purchased. At this point, calling off a wedding would not only be embarrassing, but costly – not to mention the fact that an emotional bond forms between them when an engagement ring is placed on her finger. Breaking off an engagement is usually more painful than breaking off a dating relationship because there is a greater sense of betrayal, broken promises arise, and a deeper disappointment as the marriage was within his and her grasp.

However, when we worked with pre-engaged couples, we found they had a much more objective and rational view of the counseling process. When we asked difficult questions, they had an easier time being honest with each other and with us. They had the ability to evaluate their relationship clearly without wedding cakes and non-refundable reception hall bills floating in the backs of their minds. If there was something they did not like about the other person, they seemed to admit it much more readily instead of downplaying their concerns. Consider the scenarios below:

**Engaged Couple:**

(coach) "Tell us about any conflicts you and your fiancé/fiancée are struggling with this week."

(man) "Well, this week has been good. I think we are okay. There was that disagreement about whether or not to serve wine at the wedding, but we talked about it and decided not serve wine.

(woman fidgets in her seat and replies) "Yeah, he has some relatives who might be offended, so we decided against it."

(coach to woman) "You don't seem too happy with this decision. Are you sure this conflict has been resolved?"

(woman) "Yeah, it's his wedding too, and it's not worth it to upset his family. It's no big deal...."

Is there a chance she is genuinely okay with the outcome of the disagreement? Sure there is. But, often when a couple is racing towards the altar, they are afraid to uncover and unpack difficult issues in their relationship because they fear what uncovering those issues might do to their future marital plans. What appears on the surface to be an argument about whether or not it's okay to serve wine at a reception could be a deeper issue of control, bullying, lack of



confidence, or lack of conflict resolution ability. But chances are, she is going to bite her tongue and convince herself that everything is just fine in their relationship so that there are no potholes on their road to matrimony. A common thought among premarital couples is: "Once we get through the wedding, we will work out any issues."

**Pre-engaged Couple:**

(coach) "Are there any conflicts you have experienced this week that you'd like to talk about today?"

(clients smile and look at each other, man speaks to woman) "Do you want to talk about it?"

(woman) "We had another argument about our social calendars."

(coach) "Okay, let's talk about that. What happened this time?"

(man) "She still wants to spend every Saturday night with her friends from college, but once in a while I'd like some of her time. I'm afraid that after we get married she's still going to want to spend all of her time with her friends and she won't have any time for me."

(woman) "I don't know why he is so upset. We spend almost every Friday night together, and all day Sunday. Besides that, he breaks dates with me to spend time with his buddies whenever he feels like it."

This couple is letting it all hang out. The fear of finding out that their relationship is not perfect isn't there because they are going to counseling specifically to find out if they are a good long-term match for each other and if they are ready to move to engagement. The natural action to take in their situation is to lay everything on the line so they can get the most out of their time in counseling. They aren't playing "beat the clock," so they have all the time in the world to work through their concerns and disagreements. Why start a marriage off on the wrong foot if you don't have to? Believe me, you don't have to! ~smile~

**So, What Is Pre-Engagement Counseling?**

Pre-engagement counseling is counsel a couple receives *prior* to becoming engaged. It can be similar to premarital counseling – though there are some topics typically not covered in premarital counseling which are discussed in pre-engagement counseling... and some topics in premarital counseling which are not discussed in pre-engagement counseling. However, it primarily allows the couple to go through a program which allows an objective look at each other, their relationship, and their likely long-term relational interaction before moving into the engagement phase of their relationship. Since the couple going through pre-engagement counseling is not in the midst of wedding planning, they are able to focus their full attention on the counseling process.

We have found that a majority of couples who come for premarital counseling are there to check off a box on their "things to do before the wedding" checklist. Perhaps their parents have strongly advised the counseling or even refused to pay for a wedding if the couple did not complete a premarital course. A growing number of pastors are refusing to perform marriage ceremonies for couples who have not completed a premarital program of some type. On the other hand, some engaged couples do genuinely want to go through a counseling process as a

way of feeling more prepared for marriage and as a way to learn more about how to have a successful marriage.

Pre-engagement counseling does help couples learn how to have successful marriages, but perhaps the biggest difference in premarital and pre-engagement counseling is that pre-engagement counseling also helps couples answer these questions:

- Do we want to get married?
- Are we a good match for each other?
- Can we overcome the difficulties we've experienced in our dating relationship?
- What advice can we garner from a counselor, a qualified couple, or a relationship coach that will help us make wise decisions with the future of our relationship?

When a premarital couple comes for counseling, the attitude is generally: "Please help us prepare for the marriage which will happen." Pre-engagement couples, on the other hand, often come to counseling with the attitude: "Please help us understand each other and ourselves better so we can make a wise decision about whether or not we should move forward to marriage."

### **The Benefits of Pre-Engagement Counseling**

By and far the biggest benefit of pre-engagement counseling is this: *the ability to objectively evaluate your boyfriend or girlfriend, your relationship, and yourself.* Before getting engaged, it is important to *know all you can about yourself, your potential mate, and your life goals.* In a focused pre-engagement counseling setting, you gain knowledge of each other which may otherwise take you three to five years to learn.

When we are young, and our relationship is new, we don't always know the right questions to ask or the right traits to study in each other. What couples learn about each other in pre-engagement counseling can save them from having to learn many hard lessons after marriage. We know... because we had to learn many lessons without advance warning and advice (i.e., the hard way). Eric and I have often said that we wished we had gone through pre-engagement counseling before we got engaged (though, to our knowledge, nobody was doing it at the time).

After completing our counseling sessions, some of our clients said they didn't learn much about their boyfriend or girlfriend, but *they learned a lot about themselves.* Yesterday, I was waiting at the doctor's office with a friend and she was talking about the early days of her relationship with her husband. She said that when she and her husband were engaged, she knew him inside and out, but she didn't know herself. It is just as important, if not more so, to know who *you* are going into marriage as it is to deeply know your future mate.

## The Importance of Knowing Yourself

When Eric and I were dating, I remember thinking that I was going into this marriage with my eyes wide open. Eric is a WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) kind of fellow and if he believes strongly about an issue (and he often believes strongly about many topics ~smile~), he doesn't mind letting others know. He never pretends to be someone he's not and, in all the years I've known him, I've never seen him shy away from controversial topics. He doesn't run over people, but he is more than comfortable debating what he believes is right. He is a hard worker and he enjoys accomplishing tasks he sets for himself. He had already been through seasons of self-discovery. Being keenly aware of his personality, life goals, and hang-ups gave me an enormous sense of peace as we headed down the aisle. What I didn't realize walking down the aisle was how much I had yet to learn about myself.

During the first few years of marriage, I went through some significant changes. My passion for some of my former goals weakened and new goals emerged. My interests shifted away from scholastic achievements and tilted towards wifely duties, preparing for parenthood, and spending more time engaged in church activities. Perhaps the most notable change was in my communication style. As a young newlywed, I struggled to voice my opinion; but, as I grew more comfortable in my role as a wife (and in my role as an adult), I became much better at telling Eric how I felt about... everything.

At times, I found myself enjoying my new found "voice" so much that my comments took on a disrespectful tone. Though Eric was happy to have my opinion (he'd been asking for it for years), he still wanted me to pursue the goals we had discussed and planned during our courtship – and he still wanted me to be kind and gentle. After all, what man doesn't want a kind, gentle, and respectful wife? (I'm also always happier when I am a kind, gentle, and respectful wife. ~smile~)

Thankfully, we have worked through a multitude of disagreements and misunderstandings to arrive at a place of mutual respect and understanding – though we are far from perfect. But, I believe we could have skipped a lot of heartache along the way if I had known myself better before getting married. Eric married me believing we were both passionately heading in a certain direction. How scary to get married thinking you and your honey are running down the same path only to turn around and discover that your husband or wife is sitting on the side of the road, dragging you from reaching the end of the path, or running in another direction altogether!

God is good and, by His grace, Eric and I are now sprinting down the same path, but it has been a bumpy run. We have experienced a lot of emotional scraped knees and sprained ankles along the way. Had I understood myself better, I could have been more open with Eric about the real me from the beginning. My gut instinct tells me that Eric still would have married me, but he would have gone into our marriage with very different expectations.

Choosing to be open and discover hidden truths about yourself and each other may seem terrifying at first (and, it can be at times), but it is far less scary to figure out your strengths, faults, hang-ups, quirks, and future plans now than after you are married. We can choose to discover more about ourselves if we make an effort to read, study, and dig into our hearts.

A common fear is: "If my honey learns who I *really* am, he or she may leave me." Well, there is always a possibility that you or your sweetheart may choose to discontinue your

relationship after going through counseling, but ask anyone who's been through a divorce if it is better to find out the truth before marriage or after marriage, and I am sure you will hear a resounding, "BEFORE!" "Breaking Up is Hard to Do" is more than just a song; it hurts to end a dating relationship. Yet, divorce hurts far worse, and its devastating effects are further reaching.

### **Comparing Premarital and Pre-Engagement Counseling**

Premarital and pre-engagement counseling can both be tremendously helpful. The furthest idea I want to leave you with is the thought that pre-engagement counseling is good and premarital counseling is bad. From what we have witnessed with our previous clients, it is better to begin counseling before getting engaged because it helps both parties look at their relationship through clear lenses and it gives couples the chance to work through conflicts and gain a deep understanding of each other and of each other's expectations.

After couples have worked through the process of getting to know each other deeply, and after engagement, it is *still important* to receive premarital counseling. During premarital counseling, the couple has the chance to specifically prepare to be married to the other person. Topics such as wedding planning, sexual intimacy, and daily routines come into play during the premarital phase of counseling.

### **So, Why Should I Care about Pre-Engagement Counseling?**

"Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisors they succeed" (Proverbs 15:22, ESV). The Bible tells us that it is wise to seek good counsel. We need other people and other perspectives. It is often not easy to admit that we don't have all the answers on our own and it is certainly not easy to ask for help; but, God designed us to need other people.

As a young person, I can remember my friends admonishing me, almost begging me, to turn away from certain detrimental relationships. They could clearly see that I was heading down a dangerous path. Because they were not emotionally involved, they had an objectivity that I didn't have. On the same token, I've had friends jump into relationships that made me uncomfortable. It's not that I was so much wiser than they were. My eyes and heart were clear because my emotions were not tangled up in their relationships.

When we are making life changes and pursuing a lifelong marriage, it is important to heed wise counsel – not because we aren't smart or careful, but because others can see into our lives through a lens we don't have. This is not to say that you should take every piece of counsel you receive and run with it, but you should listen to wise counsel (the key word here is 'wise'), and weigh such counsel against a lot of prayer. Surround yourself with wise friends. (And when they tell you hard things, remember to appreciate them more, not less!)

Ultimately, the decisions you make belong to you, but it is wise to glean from the knowledge of others who have walked where you are walking and of those who know you well and care about your future. Taking time to receive counsel at this stage in your relationship is a wise investment of time and money for a smooth transition into marriage which can otherwise be so tricky.

## Chapter 2

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### Is Pre-Engagement Counseling Right For Me?

Do I think pre-engagement counseling is right for you? YES! A resounding yes! I've not met a couple yet that did not benefit in some way from going through Biblically based, pre-engagement counseling with a qualified counselor, coach, or couple.

#### **But my sweetie and I get along well already...**

Wonderful! If you and your sweetie already have a thriving relationship, the counseling process will probably be enlightening and pleasant for you both. No matter how well you and your honey get along, there is always more to learn about each other. Even seniors who have been married fifty years have more to discover about their spouses (believe it or not!).

Pre-engagement counseling, unlike marriage counseling, does not primarily focus on helping couples work through their problems. It focuses on helping couples learn all they can about themselves and each other before making the decision to get married. Eric and I have worked with a good number of pre-engaged couples who have shown great love and respect for each other and each time these happy couples finish out their pre-engagement counseling, they give us specific topics or discussions that helped them strengthen their relationship even more.

Eric and I had a great relationship when we were dating, but we were sure surprised to discover how much we could annoy each other once we were married and living in the same space without understanding our dynamics as a couple and shifting our expectations toward reality. To this day, I wonder how those first few years of marriage might have been different if we had gone through pre-engagement counseling ourselves! I predict I would not have kicked a hole in that unsuspecting bag of dog food. ~smile~

#### **What if I've already been to counseling?**

If you have already been to counseling, let me say, "Good for you!" Too many people shy away from counseling because they believe that by going to counseling, they are admitting to imperfections, instability, or downright craziness. Take comfort in the realization that we are *all* imperfect, unstable, and downright crazy at some point or another. None of us have it all together, and when we think we do, God has ways of humbling us. ~smile~ God's grace is all we have to hold on to because we are fallen creatures. Going to counseling is a sign of *strength*, not a sign of weakness. We can hold our problems inside and pretend they don't exist, or we can reach out for help, expose and clean our wounds, heal, and choose to live an abundant life!

Personal counseling is a good place to start. If you are struggling with depression, issues from your childhood, or if you feel a general need to talk through some personal concerns, I would wholeheartedly recommend finding a Christian counselor and tackling those tender spots prior to engagement. And when I say Christian counselor, I don't mean someone who goes to church twice a year and has a fish emblem on his or her car. What I mean by a Christian counselor is someone who believes the Bible to be God's unfailing Word, someone who loves the Lord and serves Him in his or her daily life, and someone who does not counsel others in ways that contradict God's word. As soon as you hear the words, "Just follow your heart and do whatever makes you happy," run for your life! ~smile~ (Jeremiah 17:9)

A friend of mine went through counseling for a few months and I was amazed at the difference which resulted in her life. She was more secure. She was willing to go out and grab life by the horns, something she always wanted to do, but had previously feared. She made a career change and even went back to school to study something she enjoyed. Sometimes we simply need to talk to someone who can help climb over those bumps in life that paralyze us. Here is her story in her own words:

"Several years ago, in the midst of a difficult season, I spent the summer going to weekly counseling sessions with a local Christian counselor. God truly blessed me with a wise woman to help me work through past dysfunctional and hurtful relationships. God used that counselor to help heal my hurts and teach me so much of His heart for His children.

Although I still have much to learn, my counseling experience has had a marked impact on my life. In the years since that summer, I have become a stronger, healthier and more confident individual. My relationships with others have changed and I have learned not to let fear stop me from living the abundant life that God promised."

A few years back, I went to counseling after breaking up with a college boyfriend. The relationship was completely unhealthy and I struggled with getting life back to normal after it was over. Less than a year ago, I went to counseling again just to help me work through some anxieties I was facing, some disappointments I'd experienced, and to help me move forward. It didn't take very many sessions before I was confident again to move forward on my own. If you are facing obstacles in your life, seeing a counselor can help you gain confidence and clarity before moving ahead with your relationship.

### **My sweetie and I have read tons of books on the subject of marriage and we feel prepared. Do we really need counseling too?**

One of our most memorable couples consisted of two voracious readers. They had an amazing relationship. It was easy to tell that this couple was not only in love, but best friends. Some days, I was so enamored with listening to their stories that Eric had to remind me to keep our counseling sessions on task. I could have listened to them talk for hours on almost any subject. In short, these were fascinating people. We asked them what books they had read about marriage and she listed seven or more books off the top of her head. I'm not sure how many of those books she read alone and how many they read together, but it was clear that these folks were prepared! Had they gotten married without going through counseling with us, I

think they would have been just fine; but, they chose to work with us for more than half of a year!

She asked us to dig into their relationship and ask them difficult questions. They didn't want to leave any stone unturned. Words cannot describe how much respect I have for this couple. They've been married more than three years now, they've welcomed their first daughter into the world, are on their way with their second baby, and they are doing great! Here is their story written in Susan's own words:

*"I began preparing for my future husband long before I met Tony. I wanted to do my part to ensure that my marriage didn't just exist, but that it flourished. So I started reading books; books about the differences between men and women, the differences in how men and women processed thoughts and solved problems in daily life, about what a Biblical relationship looked like, and about how I could serve God better alongside my future spouse. I listened to marriage seminars (some of them multiple times), attended conferences, and even took a marriage class in college. I did not always agree with everything that was said by every author, teacher, or presenter, but I wanted to gather as much information as possible so that I could draw my own conclusions and opinions on the subject.*

*This 'relationship study' continued as I entered into a dating relationship with the wonderful man who would eventually be my husband. Much to my surprise, Tony joined me in my study for the next eighteen months! During that time, he proposed to me and I very eagerly said yes. Even with as much studying as we had done, Tony and I still felt it necessary to attend premarital counseling. We knew we were on the right track to a great marriage, but we had the mindset that we could never learn or prepare too much for such a commitment.*

*Tony and I were very nervous going into our first premarital counseling session as we had no idea what to expect. Little did we know that the next twenty months of our lives would be such a fun, emotional, and intense time for us as an engaged couple. Counseling helped us to solidify how we would handle the more serious issues that we had not thought to discuss prior to our engagement: how we would manage our finances in detail, what we would do if we ran into a problem with having children, and how to set boundaries with our parents following the wedding. We also got to see on a graph where we were compatible and where we weren't so compatible, which helped us be aware of possible areas of contention.*

*These are just a few examples of the precious information that my husband and I received during the process of our premarital counseling; and, after more than three years of marriage and a baby, I can say that we have revisited the advice that was bestowed upon us on numerous occasions. We found it so valuable that we went back after being married for only a few months just to continue learning about how to better ourselves as individuals and as a married couple!*

*I personally cannot put a price on our experience and would encourage every couple to not only do the minimum that a church may require, but to dig deep and get your hands dirty on some of the more sensitive topics. It is well worth it in the long run of your marriage."*

Preparing for marriage through reading and studying is an excellent first step. You can gain a lot of knowledge by reading about other people's experiences and by studying communication tools and techniques. After studying on your own, it is good to seek the advice

of others who have walked in your shoes – or others who have devoted time and energy to studying and researching marital preparation. Both your independent study and the knowledge you will gain through pre-engagement and premarital counseling will likely make your transitions from single, to dating or courting, to engaged, to married much less bumpy.

No matter how many books you read, it is important to sit down with a qualified professional and go through the ins and outs of your relationship so it is completely exposed. A third party can help you and your boyfriend work through that unrelenting conflict that rears its ugly head once a week. A counselor can help you and your girlfriend understand why you are struggling with your purity and can help you find practical ways to keep you both from temptation. A counselor can also ask you questions you would never think to ask each other. The more information you have about yourself and each other, the more prepared you will be to make the best decision for your future.

**I struggle to open up to strangers about my feelings. I don't know if I can trust a counselor enough to be completely vulnerable.**

If you are uncomfortable about the idea of opening up your heart to a counselor, you are not alone. Many people are hesitant to discuss past pain, irrational fears, and personal struggles. We learn early in our lives that people can hurt us, so we derive ways to keep our hearts safe. The problem is that when we build a wall around our hearts to keep harmful elements from coming in, we also struggle to get our issues released and out.

One of the best gifts you can give your future spouse is the gift of good communication. Yes, I know that sounds a little corny, but trust me. A couple that can communicate effectively can work through pretty much anything life throws at them. Pre-engagement counseling can help you and your sweetheart learn how to talk, listen, and understand each other. If you will allow such help into your life, it can pay huge dividends in your relationship.

And remember, if you begin working with a counselor who you can't seem to trust or you don't see any progress taking place, you can find another one. It is important that both you and your boyfriend or girlfriend are comfortable opening up to whomever is working with you. However, if you go through several counselors without finding one you trust, the problem may lie in your willingness to trust. If that is the case, I would spend some time getting to the bottom of why you struggle to trust others. If trusting people is difficult for you, it will spill over into your marriage – and trust is essential to a healthy marriage.

If you are struggling to trust yourself or others, I would recommend seeing a Bible-based counselor on your own. Choose someone you don't know and someone who is unlikely to know your family and friends. Stick with the process unless the guidance you receive is clearly against Scripture. Work with him or her to get to the root of your trust blockage. Trust is another priceless gift you can give to your marriage. Without trust your marriage won't flourish.

**I would like to go through pre-engagement counseling, but I just can't see myself spending the money when I have so many other expenses to consider.**

Spending money is difficult for me. When I was a teenager, I had a small, part time job. My working time was somewhere around two to three hours a day and I made a whopping \$5.50 per hour... after my raise. My small sum of money, which was more money than I'd ever



had before, went into a budget. I didn't always follow my budget (that has since changed after being married ~smile~), but I had a lot of fun making budgets.

After church on Sunday and Wednesday nights, several church folks would go out to eat together and I would budget how much money I could spend on entertainment. A friend of mine joked that if I ran out of "eating out" money I would eat saltines and drink water while everyone else ate burgers or pizza. Though I can't ever recall choosing saltines over pizza, I have always had a hard time letting go of my hard earned dollars. So I can fully understand concerns over spending too much money.

With that being said, knowing what I know now, I would have *gladly* chosen to spend money in my college years to receive in depth pre-engagement counseling. I may have asked my parents to help me cover it or Eric may have paid the balance, but if I had known what the first few years of marriage would have been like for us (e.g., misunderstandings, communication breakdowns, late nights trying to work through arguments, personality clashes, cultural differences, just to name a few...), I would have *gladly* paid for pre-engagement and premarital counseling.

It does seem like a lot of money before you experience it; but, after going through the sessions, working through communication breakdowns and conflicts, and learning about yourself and each other on a deeper level, I know you will discover how valuable it is. Eric and I sincerely wish we had gone through pre-engagement counseling! It would have saved us a lot of frustration and would have given us back many lost hours "discussing" problems. ~smile~

### **What if this counseling makes my sweetie want to break up with me? What if I find character traits in my boyfriend or girlfriend that I can't live with?**

During our internship, Eric and I worked with a delightful couple. In the interest of confidentiality, we will call them Adam and Brenda. They were hilarious! Every time they came to counseling, they kept us laughing. Their senses of humor were on point and they had a *lot* of fun together. When they came to our office, they had only been dating about six months, but they wanted to work through some differences and see if their relationship was heading in the right direction.

We worked together for more than a semester and it seemed like their relationship was moving right along; but, toward the end of our sessions, some important theological differences emerged and they found that their outlooks on life, people, and church were quite different. After weighing their similarities and differences, she felt confident that ending the relationship was the best decision. Here is Brenda's story in her own words:

*"What I learned through counseling was not that Adam was or was not the 'right' guy for me, but instead I gained enough confidence to walk away from a relationship that was clearly not from the Lord. After a considerable amount of prayer and conversation, I made the decision to break things off with Adam. At this point in our relationship, our arguments had become unmanageable and both of us were too young and stubborn to give in to one another. He and I could not agree upon what I thought was a very vital Christian principle.*

*This principle would have resurfaced later in our relationship if we had married and would have created a huge gap in our spiritual connection. At this point, I was seeing red flags going up all over the place and I knew that I needed the courage to end things between us. The break up was difficult, but necessary.*

*Often, as I reflect on the memoir of my life, I am affirmed that I made the right decision in ending the relationship. I suppose pre-engagement counseling opened my eyes to the overwhelming will of God for my life. Pre-engagement counseling was a very essential stepping stone in my Christian walk."*

As odd as this may sound, we consider their counseling sessions a success. One of the main objectives of pre-engagement counseling is for couples to get to know each other so deeply that when they choose to get engaged, they do so with their eyes wide open. When a pre-engagement couple goes through counseling and then chooses to go their separate ways, we are thankful that they were able to make the decision before getting married. As a popular saying goes, "Love is grand; divorce is a hundred grand." Money is not all that is lost when a couple divorces. The emotional cost is far greater than the economic cost. Breaking up can be gut wrenching (and it can also be freeing), but hearts heal with God's grace and with time. It is far better to break up prior to marriage than to get married, have a tumultuous relationship, and then find yourself in divorce court. We have worked with many couples who have learned about each other, decided to get engaged, and are now happily married. In fact, at the time of this writing, about 80% of our couples have gone onto getting engaged and getting married.

Going to pre-engagement counseling is not primarily determining whether or not you should break up. It is all about finding out as much as possible about yourself, your boyfriend or girlfriend, and about how healthy relationships function. We believe pre-engagement counseling is right for you once you have found that special person you can honestly envision marrying someday!

## Chapter 3

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### Isn't Relationship Counseling Only Good for Couples Who Are Struggling?

If you were seeing a counselor, would you tell others or would you keep it to yourself? If your counselor came walking towards you in a supermarket, would you speak to him or her or would you avoid him or her? Going to a counselor has a negative stigma with a lot of people, but why? Well, we all like to give off the impression that we have it all together. Going to counseling proves that we don't have every detail of our lives in order. So many of us either don't consider counseling at all or we keep it under wraps if we do.

#### **Relational counseling is useful as a learning tool. It's not a sign of weakness.**

Counseling can be useful for a number of reasons. It is good for individuals who are grieving the loss of a loved one or the loss of their health or job. It is helpful for individuals who are at a crossroads moment in their lives and could use help determining which direction to go. Though there will likely be times that a counselor will give you advice, so do many other people – and, honestly, it is not generally very helpful (unless the client is specifically asking for advice in an area). Instead, a good counselor will help guide his or her clients to their own conclusions by asking introspective questions. Sometimes, we just need someone to ask us the right questions. Counseling is also beneficial for individuals who want to grow in their Christian faith as long as the counselor uses the Bible as a guide.

Counseling also exists to help people work through anger, anxiety, depression, personality disorders, and other mental health problems. There is a multiplicity of reasons to seek out counseling and many of those reasons involve propelling someone forward instead of restoring mental health. In recent years, there has been an increasingly large movement toward positive psychology instead of psychology focused on pathology.

There are also a number of reasons to seek couple's counseling and not all of them require your relationship to be in trouble. As noted previously, pre-engagement counseling is helpful as a way to objectively look at your relationship and learn about yourself and each other. Most couples we see for pre-engagement counseling don't cite glaring problems in their relationship as their reason for contacting us. Most couples who contact us are approaching the point in their relationship where they need to decide whether or not they want to move forward to engagement. Pre-engagement counseling, coupled with prayer and the guiding of the Holy Spirit, helps couples gain peace about their decision.

Premarital counseling, on the other hand, is sought out every day by couples who are just steps away from the aisle. This form of counseling helps couples transition into marriage with the tools necessary to have a thriving marriage. We are pro-premarital counseling, but we

strongly believe that couples should not wait until engagement to begin the counseling process. We recommend pre-engagement counseling, followed by the couple's engagement, and then premarital counseling. The topics are different, the attachment between the couple is different, and the focus of the counseling sessions is different.

Marriage counseling, by and large, comes as a result of something not working in the relationship. It is good and brave for couples to seek counseling when they are struggling. In my opinion, that takes great strength and courage – not to mention wisdom! Good for those of you who are not willing to allow your marriage to become, or remain, stagnant and troubled! If you are in marriage counseling, consider this a pat on the back! Another reason for marriage counseling is to stop relationship problems from forming in the first place. It's preventative care! It's better to see a doctor regularly for a checkup and physical than to discover avoidable health problems on a visit when you're in pain. Likewise, it is better to see a counselor regularly than to have your relationship slowly deteriorate.

### **Some married couples go to counseling when they aren't experiencing any problems.**

Speaking of checkups... a few years back, a graduate school counseling professor of mine said in class that he and his wife go to counseling once a year, just for a checkup – a marital checkup. It surprised me, intrigued me, and excited me! It was so nice to hear that educated, happily married, thriving people were *choosing* to go to couple's counseling to keep their marriage on track. By doing this couples can catch problems before they grow into obstacles, they can keep the air clear, and they can reignite their love for each other by expressing focused attention on their marriage.

Think about how our cars work. To ensure that we don't have car trouble, we get our oil changed regularly, we keep gas in the tank, and when the engine light comes on, we find a mechanic who can tell us what is wrong and help us fix it. If we ignore our car, the engine will finally seize up, we won't be able to move forward, and by the time we take it to a mechanic, it will be incredibly expensive to fix (if the mechanic is able to fix it at all).

Relationships are the same way. If we take our relationship to a counselor, some marriage conferences, and spend time studying how to improve our relationship, the pistons of our relationship's engine will keep firing properly. When we find large and small ways to express our love to each other, it is as if we are putting gas in our relationship's tank. Without keeping our tank filled with gas (physical touch, cards, letters, loving e-mails, gifts, helping with projects or chores, spending focused time on each other, etc.), our relationships cannot move forward. When a problem does emerge, don't ignore it. When we ignore our relationship's "engine light," we can expect the problem to grow. If the problem is not fixed swiftly, bigger problems can emerge. When disagreements and problems are resolved thoroughly, they won't grow, fester, and cause more damage – so, better to resolve those quickly! Small problems are cheap and easy to fix. Big problems take more time, emotional energy, and resources to fix.

Seeking the objective help of a counselor is one way wise couples keep their relationship healthy. We not only recommend seeking counsel prior to marriage, but we recommend keeping those lines of communication in pristine working order by going to counseling at least once per year for a checkup. Marriage conferences and couple's Bible studies are good supplements as well!

### **Do dating couples shy away from counseling because they are afraid to face the truth?**

Have you noticed that the family and friends of personal trainers are often overweight and unhealthy? Or, how about those who clean and organize for a living who are likely to have disorganized and messy children? The same concept is true for counselors. It seems like those who are related to, or friends with, counselors are the very ones who think counseling is ridiculous or unnecessary. ~smile~ Thankfully, this is not true of the majority of my family and friends, but there are still a few who pop up with interesting comments or make disapproving faces when I tell them that Eric and I counsel couples through a webcam and an internet connection.

What I find particularly interesting is when I tell people, "My husband and I do pre-engagement and premarital counseling" and they reply by saying, "My husband (or wife) and I didn't go to counseling before we got married. We didn't want anybody in our business!" It cracks me up that they would choose to confide their feelings about counseling in me considering my line of work. However, my heart still aches a bit when I talk to a young couple who vows with great determination that they will never seek out counseling. From my experience as a counselor, and just in random observation, those who are determined to avoid counseling are usually the people that need it most.

The couples with whom Eric and I work are usually emotionally healthy, wise, educated people who want the best for their future. When a young couple dismisses the idea of counseling with a smile, I wish them the best and hope they have successful marriage. However, when a couple (or half of a couple) straightens their faces, narrows their brows, and firmly declares that they will *never* see a counselor, I am filled with dread for them. It isn't so much the fact that they won't see a counselor that concerns me. It's the rebellious spirit that shows in their face and body language. The rebellion that closes a couple off to help from others is the same rebellion that will close a couple off to each other. The attitude which says, "I'm going to live life my way no matter what you think!" is a marriage killer. Yes, I said *marriage killer*. With respect, compromise, and focus on God, marriages soar. Without respect, compromise, and focus on God, relationships fail. Not all failed relationships end in divorce, but those that don't are miserable at best.

God didn't create us to rely on our own wisdom and understanding. He gives us His wisdom through prayer and the Bible, and He gives us other people for support. How sad it would be if we had to traverse this world completely alone. Words cannot describe how thankful I am for Eric, my parents, other family members, and my friends who help me see the big picture when I lose focus. No man is an island. We *need* each other.

### **Healthy Couples**

Eric and I have had the pleasure of working with some of the most amazing couples! As I mentioned earlier, couples we know who have sought pre-engagement counseling tend to be second to none in the areas of mental and emotional health, scholastic focus, and ministry. Remember, seeking out counsel is a sign of strength, not weakness.

With the exception of literally one or two couples for the years we have been relationship coaching, each couple we have coached has listed an area of concern in their relationship

which needed attention – whether it be communication, conflict, lack of understanding, life goals, or purity, just to name a few. It is exciting to watch a couple grow in their understanding of each other, to learn communication tools which will bless their marriage, and to see God's handiwork in their budding relationship.

If you are considering proposing marriage to your girlfriend, or if you are expecting a proposal any day from your boyfriend, we would encourage you to go through a pre-engagement program. We wholeheartedly believe it will bless your life if you take notes, implement the tools you learn, and stick with it!

SAMPLE