

Example of 1st Meeting Process I Follow for Case Study of Marriage on Brink

SCENARIO: A couple in your church comes for help, and they can't seem to hold their marriage together. The wife is in tears as she shares hurts and sharp criticism about her husband and the husband is quiet and defensive, when he's not throwing criticism back at her. They both seem convinced the other has to change, and it feels like they're each treating you like a judge whose job is to make a pronouncement against the spouse in the wrong.

Here is a step by step of how I would walk through a first meeting with this couple.

Note, you can still apply some of this process to a shorter intervention (a couple long meetings) approach or more informal counseling-type situations with a couple, but you won't get into the same level of detail.

PRIOR [MARK THEM ON BOARD]

- **PRAY** for them and bring your own heart and anxieties to God to work through them.
- Beforehand, **invite both to share individual written description** of 4 things: the problem, their understanding of the cause, the impact it's having, and the things that are still good about their marriage.

AT MEETING (Put Steps on Board)

- **Greet, friendly small talk.** (Builds some trust and breaks ice.)
- **Go over expectations and plan for the time and consent** if you have one. Encourage them to give input as you go.
- **Pray for meeting.**
- **Summarize issues they've shared** they want to work on.
 - **Start with a synthesis of the problem** from what both wrote to you and just ask if you're pretty close.
 - Let them know not time to get into details, that will come. Keep it brief.
 - Clarify how long the problem has been happening but no further details. That might consume the rest of the time if you get too far.
 - BUT, IF THEY ARE CLEARLY IN CRISIS, it's often wise to divert and work on the issue right away... may need to pivot to expecting a 2-2.5 hour meeting.

- This will give them assurance that you're understanding them, and they don't have to potentially trigger a fight to explain it.
- Clarify their goals for counseling.
- Then move into the positives they reported...
 - Key to identify areas God has given strength as it gives hope... and it's what we'll want to be building on.
 - Also, point out things you've noticed in the opening minutes, even basics like you have the courage to meet, want to seek God, are friendly/pleasant, doing well with the conversation so far, etc. It will help them face the pull of despair and the tendency to judge each other harshly.
- Ask clarifying questions (including history), it's a lot but it really helps to know the big picture if you're meeting more than just 1 or 2 times... even then some history is good.
 - How long married?
 - Story of life, including what family life like growing up, brief story of how they met Lord. Key details to mine, how close with family members, how conflict was resolved, key values in family, what Christ changed about their life, and how they fell in love and what they have most loved about each other.
 - This will help you start to detect patterns of relating and interpreting hard issues.
 - Also, give you a sense of heart idolatry areas that are impacting.
- Pivot back to problem. any typical pattern? (Kind of venturing back and forth into the problem for short periods.)
 - Every problem has a pattern. We're teaching to join God in going after problem versus just reacting.
 - For this couple what might we look for?
 - patterns of attempts to control through things like lecturing, persuading, manipulating, criticizing, shaming etc, and patterns of defending like arguing, counter-criticizing, minimizing the issue, making promises you don't keep, getting quiet, leaving the room, changing topics pre-maturely.
 - Discuss how arguments can escalate for them, what does that look like... common steps.
 - If they have kids, ask them how these problems seem to impact them without making any judging statements about their spouse.

- All of this will help them us and them start to recognize key areas that need God's grace to change.
- What if they start to criticize and argue? What should you do?
 - In first meeting, if you've made it clear what the ground rules are and that you're not going to get into the details this time, you have 2 solid grounds to interrupt and redirect. (Note, you don't have to stop people right away as you can learn some valuable things about how they fight by watching, but just don't let it escalate.)
 - Interrupt by letting you know you hear them and understand _____ is an important issue and empathize with the pain they're feeling in that issue w/o siding with them, and let them know we'll get into the details next time, but right now it's really important to just get the big picture.
- Ask if there are any other stressful things in life that add to the marriage challenges like health conditions, financial issues, work problems, extended family problems, issues kids or extended family are facing? This is critical to know.
 - EX: In one couple that fit this profile I learned they had a child with a serious disability.
 - Both thought they were handling it fine and the child had nothing to do with their marriage problems. But as we looked closer, we discovered the child was raising the wife's stress level to the point she was unable to tolerate stress... and the child was a source of the husband's struggle to trust God... helping them through that made a huge difference. This was a case where separate and joint counseling were key too.
 - I've seen similar things with helping people with their sleep, helping them get financial counseling, and navigating work problems.
- Start to wrap with overview of key themes we'll be working on and cause for hope.
 - For me that's 3 Trees and how this fits. (Brief summary.) [POWERPOINT]
 - Talk about how they are actually experiencing similar patterns that we all get caught in and can feel completely stuck and discouraged by.... But there is a remarkable ability of God to transform things when it feels completely stuck. Briefly share my wife and my story.
- Make and propose a plan.
 - Propose a rough plan for session topics.

- Next week with this couple we'll probably look at what Bible says about conflict. Start to talk through what's difficult in the conflict and work on finding God's way through it.
 - Goals include helping them understand each other and challenge some of the ways our pain warps our vision and our flesh gets us putting too much emphasis on the wrong things and see God's better way through.
 - Really helps to have a higher view study of a key passage on conflict and relating it to the general pattern in life to give them a sense of how God can help through this. WILL TALK MORE IN NEXT TIME IN 2 MONTHS.

- Then, maybe in the visit after that we'll look closer at God's comfort in a following week and understanding each other's suffering story and how we can help each other.

- Then in following meetings, get into events that happen and work through those.
 - Key to get into the details and seek to find God's way through together.
 - Devil is literally in the details.
 - Another area to explore if you start to gain some traction is unresolved problems.

- Homework. What do you suggest? Things I like to suggest:
 - Read James 3-4 or all of James. Book in Bible that's all about conflict.
 - Ask them to spend time in prayer considering both God's love and desire to help and ways they personally can change the pattern they're caught in.
 - If they're up for it start memorizing Col 3:12-14.
 - If they are motivated to read, suggest they independently read the first couple chapters of one of our recommended books.

- Wrap by praying together and give everyone a turn.

IF YOU'RE DISCOVERING THAT THIS COUPLE NEEDS TO BE REFERRED TO A COUNSELOR WITH MORE STRENGTH IN THIS AREA. What would do different?

- Probably can skip most of the historical background questions, but probably not the extra stress questions and the 3 Trees orientation.
- Encourage them about the process of getting help.... It helps if you know the counselor and can explain your reasons for trusting them.
- Establish a plan for walking along side of them in this... put a next date on the calendar.

This is similar if you're doing an intervention type meeting. This will give you more time to focus on the meat of change which is the 2nd meeting material.

Mention Resources

QUESTIONS?

NEXT TIME: we'll get into some of the details of what that second session could look like, which is where we really get into the work on change. We'll look at starting to help them understand their issues through the biblical lens of the book of James, and how we can help them talk through their situation at a high level in a way that simultaneously confronts the fleshly roots of their problems and ministers to the pain they experienced. And we'll touch on key ways to help them see how to understand each other's suffering and find Christ in it... and, if we have time we'll look more generally at taking couples through incidents and unresolved past problems.