

Why marriage guidance?

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Marriage Guidance Counsellor

The idea of a Marriage Guidance Council came originally, before the war, from a group of doctors, clergy and social workers who were concerned for the welfare of marriage. Since then there have been many changes in the outlook and attitudes of members but two concepts have always been held in common by counsellors, whether pioneer or present day. The first is that marriage provides the best possible way for a man and woman to live and love together and rear their children. The second is that counsellors share a basic respect for the unique personality of the individual and his right to make his own decisions.

Both doctors and counsellors start from a similar premise. The patient brings the doctor complaints about his physical condition; he expects relief or total cure. The client brings the counsellor complaints about his emotional condition and expects the same. Doctors are luckier than counsellors, they can cure the malady and be seen to do so. Occasionally however they meet a patient, who when cured of one ailment, produces another. He nearly always seems to be ill in a minor way. He keeps on coming. He demands attention. Doctors probably realise they are not so much keeping such patients well, as enabling them to carry on.

The reputation of the family-doctor relationship grew out of his knowledge of the patient, the family, the family's working and social life and its emotional pressures. The doctor today may still often hear the emotional problems of patients and must surely feel it is up to him to help. He may well feel unwilling to hand over responsibility.

Two factors have brought marriage counselling to its present position. First, the lack of time for doctors or clergy or many social workers to deal with such pressures on a vastly increasing population. Second, there is a new awareness today of the need for special training in understanding emotional problems and in developing the skills to help in a constructive way. There is a vast field of knowledge of personality development and marital interaction to be studied. Sympathetic concern, worldly wisdom, or medical knowledge, is not enough.

During counselling, clients often reveal various physical symptoms of distress. They are advised to get in touch with their doctors and also to tell them they are going for help with personal problems. Some clients, however, do not wish their doctors to know this and their confidence has to be respected. This can lead to difficulties in cases where there are signs of serious depression or other mental illness. The counsellor would then consult with one of the psychiatric advisers available. It is clearly easier for all concerned, if the client's own doctor has been involved from the beginning. It is essential that doctors and counsellors should understand and trust each other.

Organisation

The organisation of marriage counselling consists of about 125 Marriage Guidance Councils throughout the country, comprising about 1,250 counsellors. These Councils are affiliated to the National Marriage Guidance Council, which is responsible for the selection, training and continued supervision of all counsellors, and for policy making. It also publishes many pamphlets and books promoting understanding of emotional problems. It has its own residential training centre, where refresher courses and other courses of interest to workers in similar fields are held.

The National Marriage Guidance Council is supported by a substantial grant from the Home Office. Local councils receive grants from local authorities and the rest of the money has to be found.

In the London Marriage Guidance Council which is responsible for counselling in the 12 Inner London Boroughs and the City, there are now nearly 100 counsellors, so it is possible to

obtain an interview without much delay. Anyone can telephone or write for an appointment. No fees are charged, but clients are encouraged to donate what they can.

Selection and training

In recent years it has become much more difficult to become a counsellor. The would-be candidate applies to the local marriage guidance council where he hopes to work and is seen by a sponsoring committee. If acceptable, his name is then sent to the National Marriage Guidance Council who then take over. He is sent a very penetrating and private questionnaire and invited to attend a one-day selection conference. This is conducted by the training officer and a team of specially trained tutors. It consists of personal interviews, group discussions and some psychological tests. It is considered necessary to have stringent selection, as not everyone who wants to do this work may be suited to it, nor be able to withstand its pressures.

After selection there are six, 48-hour residential training periods, spread over two years. During this time, the counsellor is already working and his work is individually supervised by a tutor. As well as this, every counsellor attends a fortnightly or weekly case discussion group, led by a tutor or psychiatrist or other professional person in this field. This supervision continues throughout the counsellor's career, until he has to retire at 65.

Further training opportunities and indeed standards of counselling do vary unavoidably throughout the country. The London Marriage Guidance Council is exceptionally fortunate in having so many training sources available, specifically the different kinds of group discussion led by psychiatrists, who also give their services voluntarily to help counsellors in difficulty.

Self-understanding

Inevitably, in working with the personal problems of clients, counsellors find they have to confront their own. They have to learn a new awareness of themselves. This can be a shattering process. Some of the weekly groups with psychiatrists are designed to help this process further, as it is only by understanding and accepting the unacceptable in themselves, that counsellors can expect to be able to accept it in others, or to understand with real awareness, how easy it is for people not to recognise what they are doing to cause their own distress, or what they are making others do, and why they have such needs.

Expectations in marriage

Difficulties in marriage nearly always seem to be due to a feeling that, however hard one tries, it is the other person who makes it fail. But why? The answer is usually some inner anxiety, based on the failure to find in marriage something each was hoping for. If a couple can come to see that feelings of hate and hurt, which they thought belonged to the marriage, in reality belong to the frustration of their own immature needs, which no marriage could therefore satisfy, then they are well on the way to a re-adjustment of the situation.

In every marriage there is the immediate problem of adjustment between the husband and wife, and there is also carried within each partner, the whole conscious and unconscious gathering of his experience in his earlier childhood home—his attitudes and feelings towards role and behaviour, that will affect his approach to living with the other sex in the closest relationship of all.

In any healthy and lively marriage there is bound to be conflict, but it is usually settled in such a way that each gives and gets enough for the relationship to be deeply satisfactory. If there is not this mutual respect, if one partner uses the other for his own gratification, whether he is doing this consciously or unconsciously, then there may well be trouble. Examples of this misuse between couples include domination-submission, dependence-independence, all-take-with-no-give, seeing the other as a sexual object only, or a provider only, or as a father figure, mother figure, or child figure.

Even in marriages where there is unconscious collusion and the second partner accepts the abuse because it suits him or her, this is living on dynamite. A crisis, or the behaviour of children, or a growing inner desire for something different, may bring about an explosion when either partner becomes frustrated in his needs.

Some sort of use of each other is present in every marriage, trouble only arises when these immature needs are paramount and remain the prevailing pattern. When such needs *are* frustrated, then the quarrel goes round and round and will remain insoluble until the nature of the

conflict is recognised. What is lacking in such marriages is the awareness in each partner that the other is an individual *whole* person, not just the *part* of a person that each is conscious of wanting. The ability to see other people in this light and to respect their individuality and even *otherness*, can only be acquired by experiencing such respect directed at oneself. Not everyone, has had this good fortune.

Confidential interviews

It is the job of counsellors to give clients this experience and also to enable them to see the causes of their own behaviour, and in what way they often bring about the very behaviour in their spouses that they are complaining of. How *can* anyone be helped with these insights into the self? As the difficulties are basically always caused by personal relationships, they can best be helped within a personal relationship. The counsellor offers this. He sees either or both of the partners for private and confidential interviews. These take place once a week and last for about an hour. They continue for as long as the clients need them. Sometimes a couple prefer to see different counsellors. In this case all four would confer together at intervals. Sometimes only one partner will come for help, but on looking at half of the marriage, the whole is often revealed. If half changes, so will the whole. Counsellors are willing to see anyone who is in difficulty over personal relationships, regardless of marital status.

The quality of the counsellor's support is vital. It involves a genuine interest in the whole personality of the client, the 'bad' as well as the 'good.' This creates a safe atmosphere without criticism or derision, in which the individual gains the strength to look at himself. He sees himself as he really is, with compassion. It is easier then for him to extend this also to his partner.

This looking at the self can be a painful and a frightening business. The client may not be able to face the feelings involved and he may give up. For those who persevere, it can be seen that certain changes of personality are involved. These changes do not always lead to reconciliation. In such cases it is not for the counsellor to try to persuade anyone otherwise.

Enabling clients to cope

All clients do not need long term counselling. It is often possible to reverse a situation in only a few interviews and then the couple can go ahead by themselves. Most clients want to be able to manage for themselves but are blocked by an unawareness that they can do anything to change the pattern of what seems to be happening to them. The real objective in this work is to try to help the clients develop their personality potential and to help them discover as far as possible, what is going on between them in their relationship, and the underlying feelings that bring this about. That is we try to *enable* them to cope with situations that they could not cope with previously.

As well as working with individuals, counsellors are prepared to run a series of discussions on any aspects of human relationships, based on the needs of those that ask for it. These discussions usually take place in small groups, weekly, with the same leader and members for a given period of time. They may be held in schools, colleges, youth clubs or with parents, teachers, engaged couples or any other group that invites a counsellor. As in counselling, the leader aims to create a safe atmosphere, in which members do not feel threatened. They are offered the opportunity to understand more about themselves and their own behaviour and their own values in relation to others. They can examine their own feelings and explore the range of choices open to them. It is only by such understanding of the self and its personal needs, that people can become better equipped to form mature relationships. The basis of all our work is to offer a relationship field in which individuals can grow towards their own maturity.
