Intensive Approach to Premarital Counseling

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A time-focused intensive approach to premarital training has been developed by the Smalley Clinical Team. An overview of the program is provided including goals, key concepts, assessment, and format. Therapeutic concepts such as emotional safety, effective communication, teamwork, personal responsibility, and personal care are discussed in the context of couples therapy. Integration of the PREPARE Inventory is described. Finally, the strengths and weaknesses of an intensive approach are discussed, along with training opportunities.

Despite the fact that we know more than ever before about what makes marriages successful (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001), the state of marriage continues to look bleak. Divorce rates are high, cohabitation rates are on the increase, and many adults are simply choosing not to get married. While premarital programs demonstrate significantly helpful effects, especially in teaching communication and conflict resolution skills (Olson, 1999; Berger & Hannah, 1999; Markman, Stanley & Blumberg 2001), many couples do not get the quality or quantity of premarital preparation they need.

As pastors and practitioners know, there are several challenges to standard weekly premarital counseling. Often, premarital counseling is initiated too close to the wedding date and a couple does not complete standard premarital counseling. Engaged couples in long-distance relationships cannot meet for premarital counseling before the wedding because of geographic challenges. Finally, drop-out rates can interfere with the completion of premarital training as idealistic minded couples assume they don’t need multiple sessions of premarital counseling.

The Smalley Clinical Team has been working over the last few years to better understand the needs of couples and develop innovative approaches to marital and premarital counseling. Based on a time-intensive counseling approach to marriage and premarital therapy, the Smalley Clinical Team (now known as the National Institute of Marriage), has been developing an intriguing alternative to traditional outpatient counseling. Instead of delivering services in the typical one hour per week sessions, the intensive programs utilize all-day sessions to work through a full range of relationship issues in a condensed time period. Therapists and clients alike have reported great satisfaction with both the
format and content of the intensive approach.

Historical Development
Gary Smalley has been writing, speaking, and working with couples for over 30 years. His books and tapes are widely known, and his reputation as a Christian leader in the field of marriage enrichment is well established. With such a broad reach, the Smalley ministry found itself deluged with calls and letters from people around the world who liked the books or tapes, but had a deeper level of need that often required much more personal and involved care. The Smalley organization began to recruit a team of professional counselors and psychologists to begin a counseling ministry.

The option of a time-focused intensive approach to marital counseling made it possible for couples to come to Branson for in-depth counseling. Even if a couple didn’t live in the local area, they could work with the Smalley Clinical Team to get the therapeutic marriage help they needed to get their relationship back on track. Their first Marriage Intensive program was started in 2000. By 2001, there was a Premarital Intensive program, and later that year a small-group format Couples Intensive program for married couples was added. In 2005 these intensive programs and the therapeutic team were organized under a non-profit organization known as The National Institute of Marriage.

Overview of Program
Goals/Objectives of the Premarital Intensive Program

Gary Smalley used to tell his children that they could do anything in this world if they possessed two things: the right knowledge and the right skills. In a similar way, the Premarital Intensive program has been focused on helping couples develop the knowledge and skills needed for a successful marriage relationship.

Knowledge is thought of in terms of things couples need to know and understand about themselves and their relationship, as well as marriage in general. Through a series of surveys and assessment, as well as a clinical interview, the therapists attempt to help each individual consider how their family of origin, past relationship history, stage of life, personality style, marriage expectations, and behavioral patterns, impact what they bring to their relationship.

The couple relationship was assessed by using the PREPARE inventory (Olson, 1999) to help couples identify their strengths and weaknesses, couple-type, family of origin patterns, personality issues, and special focus items that need to be discussed and understood. When appropriate, divorce risk factors, such as previous divorce or conflicted couple-type (Powers, Montel, & Olson, 1996), were presented to encourage unhealthy couples to get more help before committing to marriage.

The skills which are focused on in the Premarital Intensive program include: communication, teamwork (conflict resolution and decision making), personal care, individual emotional health, and personal responsibility. Counselors would attempt to help couples understand, learn, and apply these skills to themselves and their relationship during the actual intensive process.

Stanley (2001) indicates that premarital education can do several things. First, it can slow couples down to foster deliberation and help them become more aware of their marriage expectations. Second, it sends a message that marriage matters and highlights the importance of focusing on commitment.
and personal responsibility. Third, it introduces couples to counseling and helps them become acquainted with options if they need later help. Finally, through the teaching of healthy communication, premarital training can lower the risk for subsequent marital distress or divorce. The Premarital Intensive program has the objective of clearly communicating all four of these messages to couples as we focus on a wide range of knowledge and skills.

**Key Concepts and Principles**

Based on the work the Smalley Clinical Team has done in the intensive programs with couples in crisis, key concepts have been identified to effectively help couples break out of dysfunctional patterns and reestablish intimacy and connection. These concepts have then been translated into a premarital training curriculum that proactively helps couples recognize potential pitfalls and equips them with skills to stay on track. While none of these concepts may stand alone as completely new, the combination of concepts organized as a model or paradigm for understanding and working therapeutically with couples appears to be unique.

**Concept 1: Safety.** The team has come to understand the importance of safety, not only physical safety but emotional safety. In order to open one self up and share or connect at deep levels, people need to know that it is safe to risk being vulnerable. Individuals want their feelings, opinions, and needs to be recognized as important and treated with value. For years Gary Smalley (2000) has taught on the concept of honor, which he refers to as the number one skill. It is understood that honoring one's spouse helps create safety. Indeed, the construct of emotional safety appears to be increasingly recognized as a priority in couples therapy. Communication skills highlight the importance of a structure to keep things in check. Gottman (1995) warns against the dangers of the “four horsemen of the apocalypse,” all of which introduce emotionally threatening communication patterns. Conflict resolution models (Olson, DeFrain, & Olson, 1999) propose rules for fair fighting and steps for working through differences in a safer manner.

Therapeutically, professionals understand the importance of creating a safe environment for an individual to honestly look at themselves and make good use of therapy. When a person feels safe, they can relax, drop defensiveness, and let their true feelings, thoughts, fears, and desires surface. When both members of a couple feel safe enough to be open, intimacy and connection are more likely to occur.

**Concept 2: Fear Cycle.** Using a combination of systems theory, cognitive behavioral theory, brief psychodynamic theory, and insights from human physiology, a therapeutic concept called a “fear cycle” or “fear dance” emerged from the intensive work. Therapists begin by identifying core areas of pain or fear that have been a theme in a person’s life, and how that individual reactivity copes when that fear is triggered. Considering fight or flight reactions on a physiological level can help explain the built in human drive to work towards safety when feeling threatened.

Four destructive marital patterns are described by Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg (2001) as reactive coping mechanisms that become activated when individuals no longer feel safe. Individuals may employ a variety of other reactive coping mechanisms as well, including addictions or affairs. Thus, the team has observed that people naturally react in attempts to feel safer, even when
their behavior may have self-defeating outcomes or consequences that damage the relationship.

Using a recent conflict reported by the couple, therapists ask individuals a series of questions to help them reflect on how the conflicted interaction led them to feel about themselves, and how they reacted behaviorally in the face of that feeling. Exploring family of origin issues and previous relationship history often confirms the etiology of core fears and painful feelings.

For example, a wife's fear of being seen as "unimportant" or "devalued" may be dealt with by escalating and criticizing her partner. Unfortunately the husband's fear of being seen as "inadequate" or "a failure" may be triggered by this interaction. When he reacts by withdrawing or belittling her, he will likely trigger his wife's fears and the cycle begins to fuel itself. While this is a very simple model of a systems interaction, couples recognize a very similar dance no matter what the topic of conflict may be. Understanding and diagramming a couples fear dance is a powerful foundation to the knowledge and skills that are later presented to foster safety and empowerment.

While it is sometimes more difficult to identify a premarital couple's fear dance due to what David Olson (1999) refers to as "idealistic distortion", many couples already have examples of difficult topics and conflicts that need working through. Reviewing the PREPARE inventory scores on Idealistic Distortion and Conflict Resolution can help direct the therapeutic exploration of a couple's fear dance. When couples report little to no conflict in their current relationship, having them discuss conflicted interactions that have occurred in previous relationships in their lives and how they reacted can often give a good picture of what a premarital couple's fear dance might look like.

**Concept 3: Personal Responsibility.** The Team identified the core principles that impact emotional safety for couples. Four distinct principles emerged that seem to inform almost every intervention done with couples. Again, while none of these is completely new or unique, putting them together in a safety versus fear paradigm has been
found to be powerfully helpful as a model for both therapists and couples. Two of the principles are primarily focused on the individual: personal responsibility and personal care; and two are focused on the cooperative relationship of the couple: emotional communication and teamwork. Collectively, the Smalley Clinical Team has referred to these as “4 Pathways to Safety” or four ways to break out of the fear dance.

When couples get stuck, they often point a finger of blame at the other. Married couples caught in crisis often come to therapy hoping the counseling professional can change their spouse. Of course, this leaves the individual completely disempowered and stuck with the irrational belief that his or her own behavior is dependent upon their spouse. In contrast, with this approach couples are challenged to realize that their greatest point of influence is looking at their own half of the fear dance. Each individual is responsible for their own thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Moreover, each individual has the power to change and control their own thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Unfortunately, couples typically spend time and energy trying to get their partner to change instead of focusing on the things which are within their own control. When individuals focus the majority of their energy on changing or blaming their partner for relationship difficulties, the result is often frustration and disempowerment.

**Concept 4: Personal Care.** We live in a society and culture that suggests that fulfillment is unattainable unless one meets their soul mate, and that person begins to meet all of their needs and “completes” them. Popular songs and movies insinuate that an individual might not be able to function or live if they lose the love of their soul mate. Contrary to popular culture principles, personal care is the exercise of personal responsibility that leads towards being filled spiritually, mentally, physically, and emotionally. This approach assumes that wholeness and fulfillment do not come from another person, but from fully receiving God’s love and provisions. When an individual is whole and healthy, they are more in touch with their significance, worth, and value. When one has a healthy self-esteem, fears don’t get triggered as easily by their significant other; resulting in increased patience, healthier boundaries, increased energy for the relationship itself, and a greater sense of emotional safety. The self-confidence and assertiveness scales in the PREPARE/ENRICH inventories provide assessment of self-esteem and mastery.

Several analogies are used in teaching this concept of personal care, and differentiating self-care from selfishness.
It is understood that the healthier a person is, the more they have to give, and the more they are able to serve God and others. Being fulfilled, however, doesn't just happen unless the individual takes responsibility to attend to their own needs, feelings, and desires. This does not mean that one's partner never attends to the other persons needs. Therapists teach that understanding the other person's needs and directing attention towards them is an opportunity to express love and care. The opportunity to give and attend to someone else is not the same as assuming that it is one's job. Therapists suggest that the healthiest marriages consist of two whole and healthy adults.

**Concept 5: Effective Communication.** Communication frequently tops the list of problem areas for couples. Teaching effective communication can reduce misunderstandings, increase empathy, and lead to greater emotional intimacy. Again, all of this leads to increased safety, openness, and connection. The PREPARE inventory gives therapists a head start into understanding the quality of the couples communication prior to the intensive. This intensive approach teaches a speaker/listener method which involves taking turns and using active listening to summarize what one's partner is trying to communicate. Speaker/listener communication models are common to many programs, (Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 2001; Olson & Olson, 2000) however, the intensive model emphasizes that couples communicate at an emotional level and not just reflect content.

In times of tension or conflict, couples tend to spend a great deal of time debating who is right and who is wrong and what really happened. Of course this leads to defensiveness, belittling, escalation and the cognitive distortions associated with mind-reading or assuming one knows their partner's thoughts and intentions. Instead, couples are challenged to talk about the one thing they can be sure of, their own feelings and their own experience. "I" statements are encouraged, followed by emotional messages found in feelings statements. Speaking about oneself and one's feelings tends to lead quickly toward more understanding and compassion.

**Concept 6: Teamwork.** A final pathway to safety that is emphasized in the Premarital Intensive program involves the notion of teamwork. Many married couples who present for marital therapy report that they feel like adversaries or enemies when making major decisions or attempting to resolve conflict. Many individuals fall into the trap of attempting to "win" an argument. As humans, we prefer to get our way and therefore will defend, argue, and debate a topic with winning in mind. Unfortunately, this usually means a loss for the other person and a loss for the relationship. The conflict resolution scales, as well as the cohesion and flexibility scales in the PREPARE/ENRICH inventory can provide a good pre-intensive baseline and more details about the couple system.

The intensive model assumes that there are really only two options when it comes to resolving a marital conflict: win/win, or lose/lose. The notion of a win/lose is only an illusion because if one partner feels run over, discounted, or hurt through the course of a decision, the marriage will have likely suffered a set-back. Trust levels drop, resentments and negative beliefs set in, and while it may not look damaging immediately, the relationship can be undermined by each similar interaction.

Marriage is a team sport, and like players on the same team, you either win
together or lose together. Couples are encouraged to remember they are on the same team, and any interaction can be approached as competitors or partners. A 7-step model for resolving conflict is used, pointing out that often times the debates are resolved in only the first 2 or 3 steps. The following principles are presented: (1) Adopt a no-winners policy remembering you are on the same team; (2) Use the speaker listener method to talk about your deeper concerns and feelings; (3) Pray together about the issue; (4) Brainstorm possible win/win solutions based on what you learned in step 2; (5) Agree to try something that feels good to both of you; (6) Revisit your solution at a later date to ensure that it still feels like a win/win to both partners; and (7) Make needed changes and celebrate that you are working together.

Format of the Program
First, couples are interviewed over the phone by a trained screener to ensure that the program is a good fit for their needs. An information packet is sent to each couple after they register containing several questionnaires and surveys they are to fill out and return at least a week prior to their premarital intensive date. Premarital couples also take the online version of the PREPARE inventory. The therapists meet prior to beginning with the couple to go over the paper work and PREPARE inventory in an effort to identify needs, risk areas, and hypotheses about the couple with whom they will work.

All Premarital Intensives are facilitated by a team of two therapists working together. In most cases, a male and female therapist lead the premarital couple through the program. Couples can either schedule their intensive counseling for one 8-hour day, or two 4-hour days. The therapy is not offered as a group experience; the two professionals work with one couple for the entire premarital intensive experience.

After a brief time of orientation, the team of therapists asks the couples to share their hopes and expectations for their premarital intensive experience, and begin to gather background information and relational history from both parties. While working with the concepts of fear, safety, and the four pathways is almost always a focus, the content of the premarital intensive is customized to fit the needs and desires of each individual couple. They are given feedback on their surveys and PREPARE results, as well as an in depth understanding of how their history and individual issues affect what they bring into their current relationship.

The team not only attempts to facilitate understanding and insight, but also teaches practical tools and skills. Visual aids are used in the form of poster-paper and diagrams that explain concepts and describe the couple. They are given these to take home, as well as provided with a follow up report of all the concepts and information presented during the intensive program. Finally, couples are given any books or video series from the Smalley product line that may help them as they continue to learn and grow in their relationship.

Strengths and Limitations
The strengths of the Premarital Intensive program grow out of several factors: Gary Smalley's 30 year ministry to marriages and reputation as a leader in Christian marriages; a overarching theoretical model developed by a team of therapists, which helps the counselors organize their presentation in a concise and effective manner; and the intensive format itself, which affords many ad-
vantages compared to traditional counseling.

One distinct advantage to an intensive, 8-hour format, includes increased continuity as material is presented and issues are worked through. Counselors and couples can spend 2 or 3 hours working on issues without having to break and reschedule another appointment. Therapy can go “deep” with the couples in a short amount of time. Time is spent productively without having to take therapy minutes for payment, re-scheduling, or the small talk, which often reacquaints counselors and clients at the beginning of sessions in weekly therapy.

Another notable advantage is an almost non-existent drop-out rate. Once a couple as begun their intensive and paid for the service, they are there for the full 8 hours. Their schedules are clear and they are presented with the full content of the program. Outpatient counselors understand that drop-out rates can be high when motivation is low. Premarital couples often don’t recognize their need for preparation, and the intensive format keeps them from discontinuing before all of the content has been worked through.

Since the intensive programs are all conducted by co-therapists, counselors and couples have the luxury of two professionals in the room. The majority of the time, male/female teams are used, which balances perspectives and instills confidence for couples. Therapists enjoy learning from one another as they work together with couples. Finally, the intensive format allows couples with complicating or unique circumstances to get the premarital training they desire. The 1 or 2-day intensive format can address long-distance relationships, fast-approaching wedding dates, and a lack of quality Christian training in a client’s local area.

Certainly there are limitations to the intensive format as well. Information overload, cost, distance, limitations with follow-up help, and continuity over time can all be obstacles. Couples need to weigh these issues with the advantages of the intensive format when deciding on the type of program that will be the best fit for them. A final limitation of the intensive format is the lack of research outcomes to support efficacy. While these studies are underway, the data on an appropriate samples size is not yet available.

Case Study Illustrating Program
Bob (21) and Jen (20) lived thousands of miles apart. Bob was a college senior on the West Coast, and Jen was a junior out East. They had met at a summer camp almost 2 years prior, and while their relationship had been mostly positive up to this point, they were both a bit concerned about having had such a long distance relationship and engagement. Now with the wedding just a couple short months away, they only had their spring break to do the premarital counseling that their pastor would require to marry them. Further, Jen’s father was nervous about his 20-year-old daughter marrying a guy she had only spent a total of about 8 weeks with in face-to-face contact. He wanted a professional therapist to work with this couple and give them honest feedback about the health and potential of their relationship.

Bob and Jen each took the online version of the PREPARE inventory and filled out the paperwork before coming to their premarital intensive. First, the counseling team looked at individual factors and background information on each of them: previous relationship history, family of origin, personality styles, and the results of their inventory
in terms of their couple-type, strengths and growth areas, and family map. PREPARE identified them as a "Traditional" couple type, with main growth areas in the communication and conflict resolution areas.

Next, the therapists began to map their "fear cycle" based on some of the minor conflicts they had experienced as the stress of the wedding day approached. Bob had grown up in a family where nothing he did seemed to be good enough for his father. He was constantly pushed to achieve and even when he excelled he perceived a message of not being good enough. Not surprisingly, he was sensing messages from Jen that he in one or another didn't measure up. Jen, on the other hand, had parents who both worked long hours. She was also one of five children. She often felt overlooked, and grew up with the sense that she was not valued by her family. Her fear now consisted of feeling like she may not be important to Bob.

It would not take much to get this cycle started. If Bob forgot to call when he said he would, Jen would interpret it as a message that he must not feel she is a priority or important enough for Bob to remember to call. She would react by getting angry, belittling, or sarcastic. Bob would interpret these reactions as her judgment that he was inadequate and didn't measure up. In response, he would pull away, sulk, and withdrawal to protect himself. Of course, this just seemed to trigger her further fueling a negative relationship cycle. This same fear cycle would emerge on various issues from finances to honeymoon plans, and it was already beginning to undermine the sense of emotional safety in the relationship.

Once their fear cycle was diagrammed and processed, the 4 pathways to safety were explored. First, they were challenged with the concept of personal responsibility to ask themselves who they wanted to be as individuals in the face of the other person's reactions. Did they want to be dependent reactors who allowed the other person to determine their thoughts, feelings, and behavior? Or did they want to feel personally empowered and choose to think, feel, and behave in a way consistent with their values and aspirations? In so doing, it only takes one person to rise above the fear dance to begin to change the whole dynamic of this cycle.

Secondly, they were taught the skills of effective communication. They stopped pointing fingers and complaining about one another's behavior, and instead shared their own feelings, fears, and concerns. The experience of being understood at this level led to a sense of compassion for one another as they cleared up misunderstandings and connected with their partner on a deeper emotional level.

The concept of teamwork was presented in the context of decision-making and conflict resolution. They had already begun to see how easy it is to set things up as competitors and adversaries as they made decisions about their wedding and honeymoon. When they understood how detrimental this was to the emotional safety of their relationship, they were excited to learn about the teamwork approach of adopting a "no-losers" policy.

Finally, personal care and fulfillment were presented. On an emotional level, Bob was able to begin to see how tough he could be on himself and how he could really buy into his dad's messages and beliefs that he was not good enough and would never measure up. He was challenged to consider a more balanced view of himself. In so doing, Jen's sarcasm or anger no longer provoked this
fear. He began to see her reactions for what they were. Jen too, had some emotional and spiritual issues to work on as she was challenged to avoid the trap of looking to Bob for her worth and fulfillment. Instead, she was pointed to her faith as the source of fulfillment. In this way, she could remain self-assured, even in the midst of occasional oversights by her future husband, who still forgets to call her sometimes.

Each one of these pathways was applied specifically to the details of Bob and Jen's life together and as individuals. They resonated with each concept and quickly saw how they could avoid the fear dance and break the cycle when it began to drive them apart. They were mailed a follow-up summary report a week following their intensive counseling. Recommendations included finding a mentor couple, practicing communication skills, and a 6-month follow-up by phone or in person.

Evaluation of Program

The outcome/efficacy data for the Premarital Intensive program is still in the process of being gathered. The program format and theory is adapted from the intensive programs executed with married couples in crisis. Preliminary results from the Couples Intensive program are largely encouraging. Thirty-one married individuals who completed the Couples Intensive were followed up with after four months. The average age of the participants was 43, with a range from 23-65. Marital adjustment before the intensive was in the range of divorced couples as measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976), with the mean for the men in the sample at 78 and for women at 72. Some of the participants (29%) reported feeling hopeless about their marriage when surveyed.

At the four month follow-up, 93% of the couples were still together. DAS scores had risen significantly to an average of 97 for the men and 89 for the women. While these are still not reflections of optimal marital adjustment, they were now out of the divorced couple range. Reported hopelessness had decreased from 29% to 11%, while 79% of the participants reported feeling “hopeful” or “very hopeful” about their relationship.

Certainly, the results are preliminary and a larger sample size followed over a longer period of time is needed. Moreover, the results of the Premarital Intensive program will need to be compiled and tracked over time, apart from the Marital Intensive programs.

Training on Program

The theory and concepts of the intensive approach to premarital and marital counseling are outlined in a recent book by Smalley and Paul (2006), The DNA of Relationships for Couples. Training events on this material are offered by the National Institute of Marriage. Their seminars provide a basic orientation to the practical concepts and skills from the intensive models that can be used with couples in a variety of settings.

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