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Discernment Counseling: Treating Couples Unsure About Continuing Their Marriage

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One of the most complicated scenarios in couple therapy involves the situation in which one or both partners express uncertainty about trying to preserve their marriage. As described by Doherty (2011), this "mixed-agenda" couple occurs when one partner prefers to save the marriage ("leaning in"), while the other partner wishes to end it ("leaning out"). When couples come to the brink of divorce before they seek professional counseling, their respective agendas for couple therapy can be so misaligned that any progress the therapist tries to make with the couple is thwarted by the depth of their polarization.

Unsurprisingly, most couple therapy approaches are tailored specifically toward helping couples who are sure they want to work on their marriage. For example, all forms of couple therapy with empirical support assume some level of motivation from both partners to work on the relationship, including emotionally focused couple therapy (Johnson, 2004), traditional behavioral couple therapy (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979), and integrative behavioral couple therapy (Jacobson & Christensen, 1998).

But what evidence exists that couples who seek treatment are both committed to working on the relationship? One recent study of 249 couples who presented for therapy found that only 64% shared the same goal to improve the relationship, 24% were mixed (i.e., one wanted to improve the relationship and the other wanted to clarify the viability of the relationship), and 12% of couples shared the goal of clarifying the future of the relationship (Owen, Duncan, Anker & Sparks, 2012). Despite the fact that this study found nearly 36% of treatment-seeking couples were either mixed-agenda or ambivalent about the relationship, there has been no clear treatment approach developed for helping these couples.

The Historical Roots of a New Approach

Renowned family therapist William J. Doherty noticed early in his career the limitations of applying traditional methods of couple therapy with ambivalent or mixed-agenda couples. Impressed by the late family therapist Betty Carter's novel approach of separating partners to discuss and work with their divergent agendas, Doherty first adopted, and then later adapted and expanded, her unpublished technique into a full-blown treatment protocol, today known as discernment counseling (Doherty, 2011).

In 2008, Doherty began a research and intervention project in collaboration with a family court judge in Minnesota seeking to explore people's sense of ambivalence during the divorce process, and entice couples on the brink of divorce to assess their relationship with a marriage therapist trained in the discernment counseling protocol before making a final

decision. The results of their initial research study of 2,484 divorcing parents were striking: 1 in 4 parents reported some belief their marriage could still be saved. About 3 in 10 individuals indicated interest in reconciliation services. In over 11% of couples, both partners reported that they believed their marriage could still be saved (Doherty, Willoughby & Peterson, 2011).

These results inspired the growth of discernment counseling into a national movement. Therapists across North America can receive advanced training and complete certification as a discernment counselor, which allows them to build collaborations with divorce lawyers. Couples who indicate some degree of ambivalence in the divorce process are encouraged to see a discernment counselor before proceeding, and couples in the discernment process who solidify a plan to divorce are referred to one of the divorce lawyers. Detailed information about the current state of the project can be found on discernmentcounseling.com.

Theoretical Foundation of Discernment Counseling

What is discernment counseling? First and foremost, it is not couple therapy. This is an important issue that is clarified with couples at the outset. Because the treatment is designed to actively help couples decide on a course to pursue, discernment counseling becomes a holding place for couples to consider their options before they prematurely follow one of those courses (Doherty, 2011). The goal of discernment counseling is for each partner to have greater clarity and confidence in terms of their decision-making for the future of their relationship. This comes from a more complex understanding about what has happened to their marriage, direct consideration of each partner's role in the problems, and better exploration of future possibilities (Doherty, 2011).

At the beginning of treatment, three specific pathways couples can pursue as a result of discernment counseling are discussed (Doherty, Harris & Wilde, 2015). They are (1) maintain status quo—a couple may decide to keep a decision on hold for now, (2) pursue a good divorce, or (3) commit to six months of couple therapy with the divorce decision off the table during that time—while clarifying that a couple is not necessarily committing to their marriage for life, but to the opportunity to try the "medicine" of marital therapy, after which they can make a more permanent decision.

The Value of Discernment Counseling vs. Initiating Couple Therapy

Doherty (2011) provides several reasons why a discernment process can be superior to initiating couple therapy. First, it often takes the pressure off the "leaning out" spouse to stay in or work on the marriage—a dynamic likely already being played out by the "leaning in" spouse's attempts for reconciliation. Efforts to engage the "leaning out" partner does not allow him or her the space needed to consider why he or she is leaning out, and whether he or she wants to commit to working on the relationship in therapy. Discernment counseling allows the "leaning out" spouse space to consider his or her options from multiple angles, and decide based on personal volition which course to pursue.

Second, many couples may see a therapist for only a few sessions—not enough time to see real results—before terminating the therapy and often, their marriage. Starting "half-hearted" couple therapy can prevent couples from working through their lack of hope for positive results. It can also constrain their opportunity to fully consider the possibility of reconciliation. If properly addressed, these factors encourage more genuine efforts in couple therapy (if the couple chooses that path). Even if a "leaning out" spouse agrees right away to therapy, this discernment period is important for preventing intervention he or she may not be completely ready

for, or truly committed to yet. Sometimes both spouses are ambivalent, or partners will waffle back and forth between specific agendas during the process, and the discernment process is adapted accordingly.

Third, the discernment process helps hopeful spouses bring their best self to their marital crisis, allowing them to consider how to successfully navigate the crisis and refrain from doing things that will make the situation worse. Often, this involves one-on-one coaching about how to tolerate their partner's position, and how to relate in healthy ways to their partner despite their ambivalence.

The Practice of Discernment Counseling

Discernment counseling is short term (usually 1-5 sessions) and typically begins with a two-hour opening session (subsequent sessions are 1.5 hours). The therapist first invites the couple to share their marital story. This conversation sets the stage for separate discussions with each partner, in which details about the marriage and their positions in it are explored further. The counselor uses different approaches with each partner depending on their agendas (Doherty, Harris & Wilde, 2015).

When working with "leaning out" spouses, it is important to connect with their pain, explore how serious the marital problems are, and examine the reasons they are considering ending their marriage. It is also important to help them consider their own role in the marital problems. This expanded perspective, ironically, can help "leaning out" spouses feel more hopeful about the marriage (or an alternative future) because they learn to identify things they have direct control over and could change. All of this is contextualized within a larger systemic perspective of the relationship, so that the "leaning out" partner is helped to begin considering ways in which couple therapy would address their problems if they pursued that pathway (Doherty, 2011).

With "leaning in" partners, their desires to save the marriage are clarified. In addition, the therapist assesses how well they understand their partner's view of the problems, and whether they are willing to work on legitimate issues (Doherty, Harris, & Wilde, 2015). If they are not coping well in their marital crisis they are taught constructive coping strategies, including ways they can take care of themselves. They are also encouraged to avoid behaviors that might hurt their partner and relationship even more (e.g., pursuing, distancing, triangulating, scolding, threats; Weiner-Davis, 2002).

In the separate conversations, each person is prepared to consider what they will share with their partner. "Leaning out" partners are encouraged to share what they are getting out of the discernment process (e.g., better understanding, things to work on), and whether they would like to continue more discernment work. "Leaning in" partners may share their desire to pursue couple therapy, what they understand about their partner's concerns, and what parts of themselves they would like to work on.

In subsequent sessions, discernment counseling includes a brief check-in with the couple at the beginning. Separate conversations constitute the bulk of the session, and a brief time at the end is reserved for couples to come together to share with one another what they got out of the separate time (Doherty, 2011). Although the intensive intervention is conducted with each partner separately, it is a process the couple goes through together (i.e., it is not individual therapy).

Empirical Support for Discernment Counseling

Doherty and colleagues (2015) reported results from a study of the first 100 couples who participated

in the discernment counseling process. At the end of discernment counseling, 47% of couples chose to pursue reconciliation through couple therapy, 41% chose to move toward separation/divorce, and 12% of couples chose to maintain the status quo (that is, not move toward either divorce or reconciliation). About half of all couples (51%) had contacted a lawyer before beginning, and, unsurprisingly, these couples were less likely to choose a reconciliation path (31%) and more likely to pursue separation/divorce (55%). Of those who did not contact a lawyer, 27% chose separation/divorce, and 52% chose reconciliation.

Doherty and colleagues (2015) also presented follow-up results over a period averaging 28 months. Of those who decided to divorce, 80% actually divorced, 10% were in the process, one couple reconciled, and three couples placed their decisions on hold. Of those couples who chose to attempt to reconcile through couple therapy, 36% reconciled, 6% were still pursuing reconciliation, 28% divorced, 17% were in the divorce process, and 13% were on hold. Finally, of the 12 couples who chose to hold off on making a decision, five stayed on hold, three divorced, one was pursuing divorce, one reconciled, and one was pursuing reconciliation.

What are the main implications of these findings?

Doherty and colleagues (2015) emphasize that theirs was not a typical couple intervention study. Their sample consisted of severely distressed couples; many couples had been to previous therapy without success. In each marriage, divorce was on the table, and at least one partner was seriously "leaning out" of the marriage and reluctant about the prospect of pursuing couple therapy.

Given that context, the intent of discernment counseling is not for one particular path to be chosen (e.g., the goal is not to save every marriage). Rather, it is for each couple to have greater clarity about their marital dynamics, individual issues, and choices for the future. Since couples were relatively evenly split among those who chose divorce versus reconciliation (41% versus 47%, respectively), this reflects the likelihood that discernment work was occurring (in contrast to an outcome in which a majority of couples cascaded into one particular pathway).

Why Discernment Counseling Matters

Every divorce forever changes the lives of the adults and children involved. And, like a ripple effect, societal perceptions of marriage continue to be affected by the steady divorce rate. Although many divorces occur for the best, a great many divorces could be prevented for the better. For example, evidence suggests that adults in low-distress marriages are less happy post-divorce, while those in high-distress marriages are happier post-divorce (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). Similarly, while children from high conflict families fare better post-divorce, those in low conflict families fare worse post-divorce (Amato, Loomis & Booth, 1995).

Many couples who come to the brink of divorce face the difficult "leaning in" and "leaning out" dynamic. Discernment counseling provides a helpful structure for diverging agendas and difficult polarization. It also opens the door for greater intentionality in divorce decision-making. For couples who decide to divorce, it could help them leave their marriage with increased clarity, and greater levels of forgiveness for both self and partner. It may also help divorcing couples end their marriages with greater integrity, as well as increased attention to the welfare of all involved, including children.

For those who pursue couple therapy, discernment counseling provides a helpful way to begin because it frontloads the work with a clear understanding of the marriage and the negative dynamics that need to be

addressed—thus enabling the couple and therapist to follow a well thought-out plan for therapy. If the couple decides to divorce after couple therapy, they can do so knowing they made a good effort at reconciliation. And for those who make a permanent commitment to their marriage following couple therapy, they can benefit from their efforts in working through their marital crisis. The possibility of helping some couples save their marriage—and all couples find greater clarity and resolve about whichever path they choose—is work worth doing.

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Nathan R. Hardy, PhD, is the Dr. John J.B. Morgan Postdoctoral Clinical Research Fellow at The Family Institute at Northwestern University. He received his Bachelor of Science in Marriage, Family, and Human Development from Brigham Young University, and his Master of Science and Doctor of Philosophy degrees in Marriage and Family Therapy at Kansas State University. His clinical training has focused primarily on improving marriage and couple relationships. He has received specialized training in treating mixed agenda couples using discernment counseling. With all couples, he is passionate about helping each partner reach their personal and relational potential through appropriate self-disclosure, effective self-regulation, and increased self-respect and mutual respect. Dr. Hardy also pursues an active line of research focused on premarital factors that promote long-term marital success, adaptive processes in marriage that encourage personal and relational well-being, and factors in couple therapy and education that promote successful outcomes.