

First Aiding Marriage Training Talk



This is sample talk to be given in the Marriage First Aiding Training evening.

It follows the text of the Marriage First Aid booklet by Eric Bird.

Adapt it as you wish.

Welcome

Open with prayer

I hope this evening will help you to help others. More than half those with marriage difficulties confide first in a friend, rather than in a professional. If that should happen to you, I hope this evening will give you some idea of how you could help them.

I am basing what I say around this booklet, First Aid for Marriage, which I am happy to give you. It is by The Reverend Eric Bird, whom I got to know through our shared interest in marriage work, and who is now a personal friend. [Give out booklets]

Feel free to make notes in it - it is yours. I will follow the headings in it. I will be emphasising the most important points and filling out each section and illustrating some of it.

You are welcome to interrupt with questions - there will also be time for more questions at the end.

Firstly - can you really help?

Probably yes. If someone confides in you it may simply be because they expect your understanding and sympathy rather than other help; but it would be good if you could give help, though that will begin with listening and understanding. You may be able to give some help even if you are single; and if you are married you can help even if you are conscious that your own marriage could be a good deal better. Helping them may even help you too.

Or it may be that they do not confide in you, but it seems obvious to you that they have problems. In which case you could invite such a friend of the same sex as yourself around for a drink. Then during conversation, you could say something like "I can't help noticing that ..." (mentioning some feature of the marriage that you feel able to speak about). "I hope you won't mind me mentioning it, but I am concerned

for both of you. I would be pleased to try to help. Maybe you would like to think about that and let me know?"

But a most important word of warning. Do not get into repeated one-to-one meetings with someone of the opposite sex whose marriage is in difficulties. Some marriages have been shipwrecked that way, for both helper and helped. Involve your spouse in helping, or recommend someone of the same sex who could help them, or else meet with the husband and wife who are in difficulties together.

Secondly - What is expected of you?

Listening - maybe a good deal of it, and we will come back to that later.

But do not load yourself with the responsibility of solving their problems, and with the guilt of failure if things get worse. Ask questions and make suggestions by all means; but the responsibility for putting things right is theirs; you cannot do it for them.

And do not expect quick results. Many marriage difficulties accumulate over years, and they will probably take months to resolve. Sometimes one spouse will have to work at improving the marriage for some time before the other responds.

Thirdly - Try to avoid taking sides, especially if one of a couple is your friend.

At first you will of course listen to the one who confides. But then ask if you or your spouse can talk to the other. Do not just explain that you must avoid taking sides, tell them that you are on both sides and that you would like their marriage to become better than it has ever been.

Fourthly - Listening. Plan a time when you will not be interrupted by family or phone. Ignore the phone ringing. Listen in such a way as to see the other's point of view, though without sympathising - without accepting that the person is necessarily right. Listen with understanding.

Note the bullet points made in the booklet -

[read them]

I will add one more - learn to be outwardly unshockable.

As Eric Bird suggests, you could put it to them that they have a go at listening to their spouse without responding or interrupting, except for clarification of anything not understood. Then on another occasion when they have had some days for reflection they could reverse roles. In that way both will really hear the other, without arguing or

defending themselves, but just listening and trying to understand the other person's point of view.

(The two Dramas could be used at this point)

Fifthly - Where are they coming from, and where do they want to go?

It would be good if you could talk with them together - especially if they do not feel they can listen to each other (in the way just suggested). You can help them to do that with you. Maybe some of the five questions in the booklet will be helpful.

Or you could ask them to take it in turns to make small requests of each other, leaving the bigger issues for later. She might wish him to change the pillow cases, because she has a problem with her arthritic wrists. He might wish her to be more careful about turning lights off when leaving a room for more than a few minutes. Perhaps they could each think of a couple of little things like that which would please the other, and then thank each other when they do them. That may start them on the road to recovery. The next week they could each choose two more things, and so on, gradually working towards dealing with the larger issues.

You could share with them the four bad habits to avoid - the STOP signs -

Scoring points - when irritated by words do not reply with a counter

Thinking the worst - don't assume that something has a hidden meaning

Opting out - at some good moment an issue needs to be faced

Putting down - don't say things to squash him/her.

Instead we need to respect each other.

Even if the couple are considering divorce, as Eric Bird writes, they need to know that the consequences will probably be more serious than they have realised. Eric has given some findings from "Marital Breakdown and the Health of the Nation" and from "the Exeter Family Study". The ones he has quoted are just the tip of the iceberg of problems arising from divorce. The facts in those reports should make anyone try harder to renew their marriage. A survey has shown that five year old children's greatest fear is that that mum and dad might split up.

Sixthly - Different is not necessarily wrong.

We are all different! An experienced researcher (Dr C S Mills) has said that 80% of people marry emotional opposites. As Eric Bird writes here, that seem to supply to a couple what they individually lack. But they need to allow each other to go on being different. It can work, it often does. The 10% who are quiet people who marry each other usually succeed in marriage, even if their lifestyle may seem boring to others. But with the other 10%, the marriages of extrovert to extrovert, breakdown is not infrequent.

Differences of background, especially in their own parent's lifestyles, may cause problems. Suppose, for example, a man whose father ruled the roost and whose mother accepted it. Their son models his marriage role on his father, but he has married a lively girl who was keen to get married, but whose home has been very different. That will lead to tension - and perhaps explosion.

Also men and women are not very good at understanding each other. As Eric Bird says, men tend to keep their problems to themselves, at least at first, whereas women are more likely to talk to their friends about their problems. So women tend to talk about their marriage difficulties before men, usually.

Some other differences are -

Men try to provide solutions to their wife's problems, when women primarily want sympathy. Women try to improve their husbands, while husbands end to resent criticism. Women are more prone to change of mood, not just because of their monthly cycle: men find that difficult to understand and have to learn to live with it. Men like to be independent at times, to go off and do things on their own. A woman may think that something is wrong, until she learns that is quite normal.

In a report on a survey by One Plus One, "Expectations and Experiences of Marriage Today" they write "While both sexes experienced similar benefits from marriage in terms of leaving home and being independent, their perceptions of life together coincided and diverged in interesting ways. While being together was seen as the essential benefit and pleasure of marriage by both men and women, what they meant by being together was rather different. The meaning of togetherness for men was expressed more in terms of sharing space - the home, while for women it was put in terms of share experience. Husbands: "It's the companionship - knowing she will be there ... having someone around all the time - someone to fall back on - someone to come home to." Wives: "it's the company - being with the person you love ... being able to share things. Just being together and doing the things that we want to do." The difference between "having someone to fall back on" and "being with the person you love" is crucial - one demands the reliability of a good friend, the other the intimacy with and scrutiny of a kindred spirit. Married women articulate a more emotionally demanding togetherness, stressing the intimacy and

understanding of a close relationship. For men, togetherness is focussed on the home, hence the special importance of arriving back each day." End of quote.

Personally I think that great many marriage difficulties have their origin in men not understanding women, and women misunderstanding men. I commend a Christian book "Man to Man about Women" by James Dobson - more women read it than men! - and I also commend a secular book - "Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus" by John Gray. The values in the latter sometimes leave something to be desired, but it is well worth reading - do not be put off by the unhelpful subtitle on the cover, about how to get what you want from a relationship. Of course not every woman or man is like the average woman or man - just as some men are shorter than their wives - there are exceptions.

Seventhly - Handling conflict.

As I mentioned earlier, we need to learn to appear unshockable. We need to listen quietly as our friends tell us about what is going wrong. If we start raising eyebrows, or saying "How terrible", they will begin to feel they cannot tell us the whole truth, because we could not take it. We need to show understanding, but not shock, whatever we feel inside.

There are five ways in which couples handle conflict - withdrawing, aiming to win, yielding, compromising resentfully, resolving. The last of those should be our target for ourselves and for others.

The way to resolve conflict is to pick the right time, to make "I" not "you" statements, to identify the real problems one at a time, to focus on the problem not on each other, and to extend and receive forgiveness. If they are together and argue in front of you keep calm. It may help to ask them to stop and to reflect silently how the problem looks from their spouse's point of view. That of course applies to any difficulty, not just to conflicts.

An example of an "I" statement is the expression of feeling "I would enjoy it if we could do the washing-up together more often", rather than an accusatory "you" statement "You don't give me enough help with the dishes".

Another idea is to ask their permission to change the subject. Ask them to say what they enjoyed about each other when they first met. It may be the first time they have said something nice to each other for weeks.

If one of them tells you there is actual violence, you should suggest that they think about moving out temporarily for their own safety. Research has shown that, on average, it takes 35 acts of violence before a woman seeks help. Personally I think that is about 33 too many. If a woman has nowhere else to go, the police know the

confidential addresses of refuges. Of course I realise that violence is sometimes woman on man.

Eighthly - Life events.

Life events which can have a big effect on a marriage are the birth of the first child, the time the last child begins school, the time the last child leaves home, redundancy, retirement, becoming the carer for a parent. Talking and planning beforehand should help a lot. There are Marriage Milestone pages on the Marriage Resource website which give an introduction to thinking about most of those life events.

Ninthly - Intimacy.

There are wise words from Eric Bird on this. If you are single though, you probably wish to steer clear of discussing it. But may I just underline the words in the penultimate a paragraph - "generally speaking, if the rest of the relationship is improving, the physical side will improve as well".

There are two subjects the booklet does not touch on - pornography and homosexuality. The Christian author Richard Foster, has written about pornography - "It is a dream world - a deceptive, beguiling, artificial dream world. The sex of the pornographic trade is too slick, too wonderful, too ecstatic. Sex in the real world is a mixture of tenderness and bad breath, love and fatigue, ecstasy and disappointment. When people believe the dream world, they begin to cast disparaging eye at the flaws of the real world; indeed, they begin to seek a flawless fantasy world. Such make-believe is genuinely destructive. The Christian organisation CARE runs a website called Covenant Eyes to help those addicted to porn to break free of it.

Homosexual feelings are far less common than homosexual activists allege. The book "Sexual Behaviour in Britain" is a survey of 50,000 people. It shows that only 1 ½ % of men and 0.7% of women have homosexual feelings as much or more than heterosexual feelings. The Gay lobby's figure of 10% is wildly out. The True Freedom Trust is one of several organisations which give help to those whose wish to overcome homosexual temptations. They have a list of counsellors nationwide. See their website.

Tenthly - What next?

Maybe you could arrange another chat, and for your spouse or someone of the same sex to see your friend's spouse - and then perhaps to meet as a foursome. But if they do not want you to tell your spouse about their problems, you must respect that.

If you feel out of your depth tell them, and make recommendations as to whom they could go for help.

If they are a church member you could suggest they talk to their minister - or, if they do not want their minister to know their problems, they could go to the minister of another church.

If there is a medical problem, physical or mental, they should see their doctor.

You should keep all that has been said confidential - unless there has been any indication of abuse, violence to spouse or children, or suicide. If so, seek help from a counsellor, minister, doctor, or, in extreme cases, the police.

A very good book for anyone whose marriage is in serious danger is "The Divorce Remedy" by Michele Weiner Davis. It was written especially for spouses who wish to save their marriages when their spouse is not trying to do so. It has been the means of saving many marriages. It is secular, but has Christian values. Another very helpful book is "Love must be tough" by James Dobson.

There are also several helpful websites - google Preventing Divorce and you will find them.

Green Pastures of Boscombe offer marriage counselling, so does the Bournemouth branch of Marriage Care. But at the first meeting with any counsellor a person or couple need to establish that the counsellor really will aim to help them restore their marriage, sadly not all counsellors have that aim.

There are other ideas in the Marriage Resource web page "Helping Marriages in Difficulty". www.marriageresource.org.uk

Finally - A special kind of help.

Ignore the last two paragraphs on that page in the booklet. The marriage enhancement video series Time for Each Other is no longer available. But there are all sorts of other ways of marriage enhancement. There is a page on the Marriage Resource website describing how it can be done.

Questions

Prayer

Edward Pratt