

Options For Post-Wedding Counseling And Follow-Up

As was true for all of us, newly married couples have little idea of what life will have in store for them in their marriages. While some married couples get off to a great start, others face significant conflict or unexpected “detours.” The church has a wonderful opportunity to help nurture the growth of a young couple’s marital relationship. This in turn helps promote strong families and a strong church where God is glorified.

In our society, it is common for people to feel ashamed to seek help. Often, this leads distressed couples to hide their issues and allows Satan to harm the marriage. The Scripture, however, equates seeking good counsel with wisdom (*Proverbs 12:15*) and encourages the older to teach the younger (*Titus 2:3-5*). Therefore, a more proactive, growth-focused approach to working with couples is to meet with them early in their relationship and help to guide them as they grow. Also, some couples may be more willing to ask for or accept help if we reach out to them. Below are some suggested formats for communicating with couples about how they are doing and for offering assistance if it would be helpful.

I. OPTIONS FOR FOLLOW-UP.

An elder can consider following up with couples at any time after the marriage. However, due to the busy schedules of most elders, it is often not possible to do as much follow-up with young couples as would be ideal. Therefore, the options for follow-up below seek to meet the needs of young couples while also being mindful of the time constraints elders have. Below are a few suggested time periods where follow-up may be particularly welcomed by couples.

- During the first year of marriage: Between three months to one year after the wedding is a good time to discuss their initial adjustment to marriage and relationship growth. This is also a good time to discuss topics that didn’t get covered in premarital counseling due to time constraints.
- Between one and three years after the wedding: This is a good time to discuss the growth of their relationship and how they are doing at keeping a spiritual focus in their marriage. Discussion of patterns they are establishing, their standard of living, and overcoming hurdles in their relationship are relevant.
- Between three and five years after the wedding: This is a good time to discuss the growth of their marriage and challenges that often come during this time period related to children, balancing work and home life, or other life transitions.

A. Option 1: Letter and self-evaluation questions with optional discussion initiated by the couple.

In this option, elders send a letter or email and a document with questions for the couple to use to evaluate their marriage and discuss how they are doing. The letter invites the couple to contact the elder if they identify issues or concerns they would like to discuss or get some help with. A sample follow-up letter and a document entitled “Questions to Consider when Reflecting on your Marriage” can be found at the end of this section. The self-evaluation questions cover the following areas:

- Spirituality and spiritual leadership.
- Emotional support and interaction.
- Relationship with in-laws.
- Sexual relationship.
- Communication.
- Conflict resolution.
- Finances.
- Children and family.
- Church support.
- Personal problems and issues.

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B. Option 2: Mentoring.

For this option, an elder assigns a newly married couple to a mature, spiritually sound couple with a good marriage. Ask the mentor couple to plan a time to meet and talk to the young couple about marriage experiences and suggestions. One suggestion is to have a mentor couple meet with a newly married couple at least three to four times in the first year of marriage. For example, they could meet with the couple once per quarter of the year or at three months, seven months, and twelve months after the marriage. This type of mentoring relationship can be time limited (e.g., one year) or ongoing and maintained by the two couples. An elder may want to have some couples in his church go through the ACCFS Mentor Training program so they can be ready to work with newly married couples. The elder should establish reporting guidelines with the mentor couple.

C. Option 3: Follow-up sessions with the elder.

Schedule a time to meet with the couple and discuss some of the topics in Section II below. The elder can also use the “Questions to Consider when Reflecting on your Marriage” document as a guide. It may be helpful for the elder and his wife to meet with the couples together. While meeting with couples may be a very beneficial option, it may be difficult to accomplish due to scheduling and time constraints.

D. Option 4: Follow-up sessions with a minister.

Assign a minister to a newly married couple and ask them to meet and discuss their marriage in general or using the questions below. It may be helpful for the minister and his wife to meet with the couples together. The minister can use the “Questions to Consider when Reflecting on your Marriage” document as a guide. The minister and the couple should have an agreed upon understanding about the frequency of these visits. The suggestion of meeting once per quarter or at three, seven, and twelve months after the marriage is a good model to work from. The elder should establish reporting guidelines with the minister.

E. Option 5: A combination approach.

Any of the above options can be used in combination with others. For example, an elder may have a newly married couple meet with a minister or mentor couple during the first year, but then schedule to meet with the couple at some point as well.

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II. QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION WITH COUPLES.

A. Sample questions for three months to one year after the wedding.

1. Review married life and discuss both what is going well and any concerns they have.
 - What changes has your marriage created in your life?
 - What are you doing to adapt to those changes?
 - What change did you least expect?
 - What has pleased you most?
 - What has disturbed you most since marriage?
 - What is your spouse's strongest point?
 - What do you wish he/she would do differently?
 - How do you feel about yourself?
 - What topics did we fail to cover in our premarital counseling that we should have covered?
 - Encourage the couple to work through any premarital modules that they have not read.
2. Prayer life and family worship.
 - Has your marriage helped your spiritual growth? How or why not?
 - How are you doing at blending your spiritual lives together?
 - How are your individual walks with the Lord going?
 - How are you doing at finding time to pray, read the Bible, and serve together?
 - Any problems?
3. Relationships with family members.
 - How are you getting along with both sets of parents and families?
 - Discussion of leaving and cleaving.
 - Any problems?
4. Affection and Sexuality.
 - Are you satisfied with how you are showing and receiving affection?
 - Are you both feeling comfortable with your sexual relationship?
 - Are you having any problems for which you need help or additional information?
5. Children.
 - Parents set the example (*II Cor. 12:14*).
 - We must teach them (*Deut. 4:9-10 & Deut. 6:5-7*).
 - We must train them (*Prov. 22:6*).
 - We must discipline them but not abuse them (*Prov. 13:24*).
6. Reinforce thoughts presented in premarital counseling.
 - The four R's of marriage – Responsibility, Respect, Romance, and Repentance.
7. Develop a good relationship with the couple.
 - Encourage them to contact elder if problems surface.
8. Conclusion.
 - Ask for questions or comments.
 - Discuss next counseling session.
 - Pray with couple.

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B. Questions for three to five years after the wedding.

1. Review of how their marriage is going and discussion of any problems or concerns.
 - Ask the couple to identify three strengths and three areas where they need to grow in their marriage.
2. Physical and/or emotional problems.
 - How are you dealing with stress?
 - How is your health?
3. Individual, couple, and family worship.
 - Attitude toward God and the Church.
 - Involvement in church activities and service.
 - Personal spiritual growth.
 - The spiritual union of the couple.
4. Financial stewardship.
 - Discussion of occupation and keeping a Christ-honoring focus.
 - Lifestyle.
 - Budgeting and living within their means.
 - Discussion about debt.
5. Relationship Growth.
 - What are the fruits of your marriage?
 - How are you doing at practicing forgiveness?
 - How are you doing at expressing love to one another?
 - Is your marriage bond growing?
6. Children.
 - How have they affected your marriage?
 - Discuss additional family planning if this is a problem for them.
 - Use as a guideline the confidential elder minutes, Page 285, Taylor, Birth Control, Items 2 and 3.
 - Counsel with physician.
 - Caution on abortive methods.
 - Commit the matter to prayer.
 - A personal matter between you and God. DO NOT DISCUSS WITH OTHERS.
7. Plans for growth in marriage.
 - Identify specific ways they can address the areas where they need growth.
 - Getting away as a couple.
 - Review of premarital/marital handouts and modules.
8. Conclusion.
 - Any questions or comments?
 - Pray with couple.

