

What Marriage Counselling Means To Me.....

Amrita Clements¹

¹Consultant Marriage and Family Therapist, Mumbai.

E-mail – amritaclements@gmail.com

The couple sit in front of me. Both nervous, they've never been to a therapist before, and there is so much spoken in their silence as I observe them: I observe how they have created a relationship that is based on trust, love and respect. We have all learned through personal experiences the importance of trust and how it can make or break a relationship. And as they speak, I learn that they trust each other to an extent where they are willing to show their weaknesses to each other, they are willing to put their masks away and reveal their darker sides which are hidden from the world, they come to understand that they can take a break from perfection in each other's presence. Trust can be scary and fragile but it is also deep and strong and it is essentially needed for them to feel safe in their relationship. Safe from outsiders who can step in and destroy what they have built, safe enough for them to let their guard down to be vulnerable with each other and safe enough to learn from each other and grow together and separately as individuals. I watch them love each other with such intensity and passion but I marvel how they express it in such different ways. He will protect her and fight for her and she will give to him selflessly and care for him like only she can. They love how they complement each other and share so many similar core values and at the same time recognize their differences and not change the other person because of them but understand those differences and see how it can add to what one person may lack individually. Their love is based on a friendship in which they do not run out of conversation and they are able to laugh at each other and with each other. They encourage each other to grow individually because of the mutual respect they share. Respect for who the other person is, what they bring to the table, what they bring to the world, their purpose in life, their goals, ambition and passions, their beliefs and what their background is and how it has shaped them. Without respect they will try and change the other person, because of respect they learn to admire them. These are not two perfect people I have showcased for you, this is not a perfect marriage I have described but it is two imperfect people striving to create something beautiful, long lasting and powerful, so the world can be impacted by this union.

India is changing at a very fast pace and radical change impacts other systems, one of them being marriages. With the joint family gradually being replaced by the nuclear family, partners are unsure of who to turn to for help- in bringing up children, in resolving conflict and in disclosing issues that are too personal to share with friends or people outside the family. With the definition of a family changing, traditional roles in the family are also changing. Women now have full time jobs and are balancing

both their work and their household. Men are expected to help with household chores and are also expected to help bring up their children; not only financially but they are expected to emotionally invest in their kids too. According to recent studies India is getting more comfortable with the idea of extra marital affairs because like the rest of the world we are a generation that wants more and wants immediate gratification and believes replacing something is easier than fighting for it. With technology advancing, partners are able to always stay connected but do not feel connected. With inter religion marriages increasing, partners walk into a marriage not knowing what to expect, not knowing how they will be received by family and friends and not knowing how the world will view them. Marriages and families make up the basic units of society and rocky marriages produce unstable individuals which in turn produces confused and unhappy children, which leads to a generation that is struggling with loneliness and depression which then leads to all kinds of addiction and even suicides.

A marriage is a union of two cultures. Here culture refers to an individual's background, family, education, values, spirituality, beliefs and hopes. For some it may be a clash of cultures for others, they gradually learn what they will bring from their respective cultures to this new relationship, what they will discard and what they will create together to form their own new culture. For this reason there is a strong need for premarital counseling. Pre-marital counseling provides a platform to ensure that each person knows as much as possible about the other before making a life-long commitment. Pre-marital counseling creates a safe space facilitated by the counselor, where each partner gets to acknowledge what they anticipate will be the relationships greatest strengths and greatest challenges. Both partners understand how they complement each other's personalities and also understand their differences and how that can play out in their relationship. Pre-marital counseling also explores how partners currently resolve conflicts and it gives them an opportunity to learn different tools for resolving future conflicts. It prepares partners for what lies ahead when their honeymoon phase transitions into real life. For couples, pre-marital counseling is meant to be a positive and affirming experience that enhances their commitment to marry.

John Gottman, a professor in psychology known for his work on marital stability and relationship analysis through scientific direct observations identified that the lack of adequate repair following an argument is the biggest contributor to marital unhappiness and divorce. People in marriages seek counseling for a number of reasons, from power struggles and communication problems, to sexual dissatisfaction and infidelity. Studies show that on average, partners will not seek therapy until they have been unhappy for many years. Therefore partners in a marriage have already formed a rigid pattern of interaction and fall into this pattern in a conflict and need the help of an objective observer to recognize this pattern, validate their point of views and form a new healthy pattern of interaction.

When using Solution focused therapy, an evidence based and strength based model with couples, it encourages couples to describe a preferred future together and collaborate with the therapist to find ways in which they can work to make this future happen. In contrast to problem focused strategies, Solution Focused Therapy focuses on exceptions to the problem rather than on the problem itself to activate personal resources and initiate solution strategies. Couple interaction is filtered through the therapist during the early stages in order to dampen reactivity and facilitate mutual understanding. The generating of solutions and new meaning occurs when there are changes in perceptions, patterns of interacting and living, and meanings that are constructed with the couple's frame of reference.

A large number of couples seek therapy because of lack of communication between partners. Once communication has deteriorated, it is often hard to get it going back in the right direction. The solution-focused approach to effective communication seeks to identify when the partner had been communicating at their absolute best. This sort of communication generally takes place at the initial stages of courtship and marriage when each partner works equally hard at understanding and being understood and each making an effort to communicate in a way that uplifts the relationship. Most couples do not notice or recognize the use of their skills in the beginning. Using communication enhancement tools, the solution focused therapists help facilitate this new interaction pattern with couples, in which they use skills which they already possess or used to possess to build their relationship and build each other.

In marriage counseling it is crucial to enhance the strength of the partnership of a couple. All people have strengths and weaknesses. The trick to having a strong partnership is to use your strengths to overcome your partner's weaknesses and allow your partner's strengths to overcome your own weaknesses. Most people are highly aware of their weaknesses but not their strengths and therapy helps highlight each individual's strengths so it can be maximized in the relationship. Creating a strong partnership is also a challenge because many people have a tendency to do what they are comfortable with rather than doing what actually works. According to Elliott Connie, 'When couples are able to prioritize what is best for them rather than what is comfortable, the outcome is an efficient system and an effective relationship dynamic that brings out the best of both partners.'

What does marriage counseling mean to me?

It means giving a platform to partners to voice their concerns, to speak of their struggles and insecurities, to be able to be vulnerable fully knowing they will not be attacked in the process, to change patterns of interaction, to mend what is broken and to heal not only a hurting relationship, but two hurting individuals. Marriage counselling to me means the enhancing, the rebuilding, the fostering of a partnership, that just needed a mason, me, to do some repair work, and get them back to seeing each other as they once saw each other.