

What is Romantic Love Anyway?

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As marriage counselors who work with a great many hurting couples on a daily basis, we are surprised at how little engaged couples think about the marriage. They get so busy buying the dress, renting the tuxedos, designing the cake, preparing the ceremony that often times the marriage relationship gets put on the back burner. Sometimes just mentioning pre-marital counseling to the blissful bride- and groom-to-be elicits a somewhat dumbstruck response. "But we're so happy," they say as they look affirmingly into each other's eyes. "How could anything go wrong?" At that point our realism kicks in and we want to say, "Just give it time, sister, something will go wrong." Why will it go wrong? because that blissful feeling won't last forever.

Neurobiologists have found that there is a chemical released in the brain when a couple falls in love. This chemical is called phenylethylamine and it functions in the body much like an amphetamine thus explaining the superhuman feelings of a couple who is falling in love. They often make statements like "I feel like I can walk on air", "I don't need to eat", "The grass is greener", "The sky is bluer." Since phenylethylamine is released in the presence of your partner, you want to spend every waking moment with him and most couples do just that. Amazingly enough during this stage of their relationship, they never seem to tire of one another.

But unfortunately there is a villain in this fairy tale. Phenylethylamine highs cannot last. As with any chemical your body builds up a tolerance to it and the body requires more and more of the substance to acquire love's special spark. Neurobiologists say it takes about four years for the chemical to fade, to run its course. Once the chemical is gone, the couple is faced with the difficult challenge of doing love with their own basic brain chemistry. This can create quite a struggle for many married couples.

Now that we as therapists know this information, we can warn young lovers that their relationship will be tested. This is where those couples who have had pre-marital counseling seem to shine. Statistically, those couples weather the storms of the first year of marriage better than couples who did not participate in pre-marital counseling. And with the 57% divorce rate in this nation, we think pre-marital counseling is a good idea for every couple.

Proverbs says that there is wisdom in many counselors. There are a great many pre-marital programs available through pastors, lay ministers, singles sponsors, or trained relationship therapists. Our program is just one of many. A fresh, objective perspective can be very effective in giving you guidance. For those of you who are unfamiliar with what happens in pre-marital counseling, let us familiarize you.

A good pre-marital counseling program will acquaint couples with the six areas that couples conflict about which often lead to divorce. In therapy we call these toxic subjects because it can become toxic for couples to discuss them. These issues are money/finances, sex, in-laws, child rearing, roles (delegation of responsibilities and jobs in managing the home), and religion/spiritual leadership. In counseling couples are given ample time to discuss these issues thereby aiding conflicts that might ensue. Many young lovers come back to us in the first year of marriage and thank us for helping them develop a plan to handle the problems they naively thought wouldn't occur.

Another key to a successful marriage is healthy conflict resolution. Pre-marital counseling will help couples develop their conflict-resolution style. We have our own inventory we give couples that we have included at the end of this article.

Relationship researchers have determined that there are certain conflict-resolution styles that can lead to divorce. These are stonewalling (withdrawal), defensiveness, criticism, and contempt. Pre-marital counseling can help couples find these marital parasites early.

The next important issue that relationship counseling should cover is communication. During the blissful, phenylethylamine stage of a relationship, it is quite natural for couples to read each others' minds, even finish each others' sentences. How many times have you heard young couples say, "We just think alike", "She knows me so well", "I feel whole in his presence"? Once again we find this aided by the couple's brainchemistry. No wonder so many pre-marital couples think they don't need counseling to aid in communication. It's all too shocking when these mystical mind-reading processes come to a halt, which incidentally is at our four-year critical mark. This is when couples really have to learn to communicate.

Good pre-marital counseling teaches couples tools to do just that. Communication techniques that promote understanding, foster empathy, bring about insight, and facilitate forgiveness are essential parts of pre-marital counseling.

In addition to providing all of these helps for young couples, pre-marital counseling can help you with any unresolved individual baggage you may knowingly or unknowingly carry into your marriage. Issues such as low self-esteem, unresolved issues in your family of origin, unresolved guilt, and others can rear their ugly heads and reek havoc on a new marriage. More than anything pre-marital counseling gives couples the confidence that they can beat the odds and become the soul mates God intended them to be.

Conflict Resolution Inventory

1. Which predictors of divorce apply to you (stonewalling/withdrawal, defensiveness, criticism, contempt)?
2. List several childhood conflicts or traumas.
3. How did you respond? What did you do?
4. List several relational conflicts or traumas.
5. How did you respond? What did you do?
6. The main ways you resolve conflict are (write a brief paragraph)
7. What are you going to change about your conflict style?

Beverly and Thomas Rodgers have been Christian counselors in Charlotte, NC for the past 20 years and together they own Rodgers Christian Counseling. They have co-authored two books. How to Find Mr. or Ms. Right: A Practical Guide to Finding A Soul Mate and Soul-Healing Love: Ten Practical, Easy-to-Learn Techniques for Couples in Crisis (Resource Publications Inc.) are both available in bookstores or by calling (704) 364-9176.