

A relationship counselling pilot for couples seriously considering divorce

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The idea of offering marriage counselling to people considering divorce came from research in the 1980s which found that a significant proportion of people who divorced later regretted it. This briefing summarises the results of a government sponsored pilot.



In 1997 a government sponsored pilot project was set up to evaluate the use of relationship counselling and information as part of a proposed move to no-fault divorce. McCarthy et al (2004) recommend the results of the follow up study be used as a guide to family policymakers.

Nearly one in five couples seriously considering divorce stayed together after being given relationship counselling and information about divorce. Although some couples were able to reconcile, for others receiving information had simply been a step in the separation process.

It seems that men were less likely to carry on living with their spouse after contemplating divorce if they had children under age 11. This is the opposite of what might be expected and suggests that the presence of young children can push men away from marriages. Certainly the transition to parenthood is well documented as being a time when relationship satisfaction falls (Mansfield, 2004; Cowan & Cowan, 1997; Belsky & Pensky, 1988).

Marriage counselling was found to play a variety of roles for couples who separated as well as those who stayed together:

- Men were more likely than women to be intent on saving their relationship, while women were more likely to focus on personal issues such as enhancing self-understanding.
- Less than 45% of the people who used marriage counselling indicated that they were doing so in order to 'save' their relationship. Many people who went for counselling after they had received information felt they had left it too late and were unsure of what they hoped counselling would achieve. The researchers say that this presents a challenge for policymakers to *encourage the use of counselling at key transition points* or when something happens that can destabilise the relationship.

- Some people found counselling helped them by improving communication and managing potential arguments. Others find the act of going for counselling beneficial in itself.



- More than two thirds of those who went for counselling either to save their marriage or to make up their mind about whether to save it, indicated they were happy with the service they received.
- Of people who went to counselling and failed to save their marriage: at least one of the spouses had made up their mind that they wanted to divorce.
- Some people found counselling useful in order to help them deal with divorce by helping them to order, confirm and accept their feelings. Counselling in these circumstances does not make divorce easy but can assist people in coming to terms with the situation.
- The research casts doubt on the usefulness of voluntary mediation in helping divorcing couples to resolve their disputes about money, property and children. Only one in four of the couples who went through mediation managed to resolve all the issues in dispute, and fewer than half were satisfied with the mediation.
- The study found divorced parents unprepared for the difficulties of parenting after divorce. The researchers say that there is a strong case for piloting the US-style parent education programmes which tell parents about the difficulties they will face and how to put the advice into practice.
- Marriage counselling seems to be effective in helping couples save their relationships when both partners are committed to doing so. However, counselling is still a last resort for many. Researchers believe counselling would save more relationships if there was a serious cultural shift to people seeking help *before* their relationships are under severe pressure. They recommend relationship support services to improve the *quality* of relationships, regardless of whether parties stay together, particularly those of parents.

References:

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