

Most Singles Yearn to be Married for Life and Want Premarital Education

by K. Jason Krafsky

Marriage is not dead! It is very much alive in the hearts of a vast majority of today's unmarried Americans.

According to the study *With This Ring ... A National Survey on Marriage in America* conducted by the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI), 86-percent of American singles want to be married someday. Despite living in a culture with lax divorce laws, watching Hollywood's high profile couples treat marriage like a revolving door, and hearing the "half of all marriages end in divorce" myth repeated incessantly over the last two decades, today's singles still want to live happily ever after ... with rings. They want a lifelong marriage.

But before they ride off into the sunset, singles plan to stop and ask for directions. According to the survey, three-out-of-four unmarried persons who are searching for someone to marry said, "they would attend a free premarital education class."

"I don't know what a healthy marriage looks like," said one bride-to-be. "Almost every married couple in my life has either divorced or has a dysfunctional relationship. I don't want to end up like them." With the lack of role models, engaged couples are turning to churches, counselors, and community organizations for marriage preparation programs - and good thing. Investing in the marriage before the wedding makes a significant impact. The NFI survey shows that couples who had premarital education rated the quality of their marriage higher than those couples who did not. Yet, only one-third of ever-married couples received premarital education.

If today's singles follow through in their quest for premarital education (after finding a mate to marry), we would witness a significant spike in the percentage of couples who receive premarital preparation, and therefore stronger and healthier marriages.

This information is good news for those who have been looking for viable solutions to reverse divorce trends. If most singles desire to be married, and a majority of them want premarital education, and premarital education helps marriages stay healthier and last longer, supplying more opportunities for couples to prepare for marriage is a no-brainer.

That is, if churches, ministries, and community marriage initiatives are paying attention. Here are some tips to start or enhance a program for engaged couples.

Give Couples a Premarital Experience: This generation admittedly knows little about what it takes to make a marriage last. But they want to know. A well-intentioned lecture or an armload of books for couples to read won't cut it. In addition to Scriptural insights, give couples practical conflict resolution and financial management skills. Don't speak at them, engage couples in a relationship building experience. Take them through interactive materials, such as *10 Great Dates Before You Say "I Do"* or *Before "I Do" – Preparing for the Full Marriage Experience*.

Gain Deeper Insights by Using a Relationship Inventory: Your time with couples is limited. Make the most of their time (and yours) by having couples complete a relationship inventory. An inventory provides you deeper insights into a couple's relationship, and enables you to affirm their relationship strengths while strengthening their growth areas. *PREPARE* and *FOCCUS* are the most popular, and can be administered by

pastors and counselors after completing a one-day certification training. Also, there are online inventories couples can complete on their own, such as *The Couple Checkup* (available at FullMarriageExperience.com).

Encourage Couples to Go Further. Couples can get a lot out of attending a conference or retreat. FamilyLife's *Weekend to Remember* conference has an engaged couples track, many denominations offer Engaged Encounter weekends, and Grow Toward Oneness provides monthly weekend conferences for engaged couples. Attending an event creates another dynamic for couples that complements what they receive from a class or couple-to-couple premarital program.

Require Premarital Education: Many weddings take place in a church, and most weddings are officiated by clergy. As the gatekeeper to matrimony, it only makes sense that pastors require premarital education for engaged couples. Just don't be heavy-handed with the requirement. Explain the "why" behind the prerequisite. Convey genuine concern for their future marriage success. Share the research-backed results of the long-term benefits marriage preparation can have (i.e. better communication, less chance of divorce, and greater satisfaction with one's mate and marriage).

Work With Others in the Community: Congregations can create a community standard that requires premarital education. Thousands of churches in hundreds of communities have made such a pledge, and are experiencing tremendous results. The increased demand for premarital services results in an increased supply of services. In some communities, churches and organizations offer premarital classes or seminars that other churches can send couples to. The local camaraderie can spark the creation of much needed services, such as premarital education for remarrying couples.

This marriage preparation opportunity isn't just for the professionals! Parents and seasoned married couples have a part to play too.

Parents: Give your son or daughter, and future daughter or son-in-law, the gift of a lifetime (a chance at experiencing all marriage has to offer). Sponsor them to a pre-marriage conference. Buy them books about marriage. Encourage them to attend a premarital education class. Your endorsement of relationship-enhancing opportunities could make a difference.

Seasoned Married Couples: Become a Marriage Investor! Facilitate a class or small group for engaged couples through your church. Organizations like Marriage Mentoring train seasoned married couples to be marriage mentors. Whether it's in a formal setting or not, find an engaged couple you know, or who attends your church, and invest in their future marriage. Simply befriend engaged or newlywed couples to spend time and discuss married life with them. You don't have to be perfect, or know all the answers to their questions. Be real, honest, and available. You may be the only healthy model of marriage they know.

Whether it is driven by the fear of divorce or hope for the future, today's singles want help before they embark on the marriage journey. It is up to each of us to do our part to give it to them. This may be our best chance to turn the tide on family breakdown, and transform this current divorce culture into a marriage culture.

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