

WHAT TO DO WHEN A COUPLE NEEDS MARRIAGE HELP

During the course of most Married Community Groups, some couples may experience tension in their marriages. Tensions are normal in marriage—all marriages. In fact, they're opportunities for God to strengthen the relationship.

But some couples experience *unresolved conflict*. That's different than the normal tensions of marriage. This kind of conflict doesn't lead to growth and a stronger marriage without outside help. That's because unresolved conflict leads to unhealthy patterns of communication that, once established, are difficult to break.

Many couples facing unresolved conflict wait too long to seek help. A study by the Gottman Relationship Institute revealed that the average couple waits six years before seeking help. That's a dire statistic when you consider that half of all failed marriages end within the first seven years.

As followers of Jesus, we believe that God designed marriage. He wants our marriages to be a picture of the kind of intimate, loving relationship that he has with Jesus and the Holy Spirit and that he wants with each of us. Couples in your group who are experiencing problems didn't end up under your leadership by accident. God placed them in your group. Even so, you may feel unprepared and under-qualified to deal with the couple's problems. That's okay. God doesn't expect you to solve their problems, but he will give you the opportunity to point them toward the restoration only he can provide.

How do I know if a couple in my group needs help?

Here are some warning signs that a couple in your group may be struggling with unresolved conflict:

- Criticism or harsh words directed toward a spouse during group discussion
- Unhealthy conflict during group discussion
- Talk of feeling trapped in the marriage
- Assigning blame to a spouse
- Mention of arguments that remain unresolved
- Apparent emotional withdrawal from the marriage

How do I encourage a couple in my group to seek help?

The toughest part of encouraging a couple to seek help is usually starting the conversation. Here are tips for navigating that discussion:

- *Pray.* Praying for the couples in your group—especially a couple that's struggling—may be the most important thing you can do. Having a marriage that reflects the type of relationship Jesus wants to have with each one of us requires daily reliance on the Holy Spirit. Pray that God is in the center of the marriages in your group and for his Holy Spirit to show the couples any obstacles to him moving in their marriages. As you prepare to have a conversation with a couple struggling with unresolved tension, pray that they're open to hear what you have to say. Pray that your heart is open and that the Holy Spirit guides you in the conversation.

- *Affirm the couple.* It's always good to start with the positive. Let them know that you know they want to have a great marriage. After all, being part of a Married Community Group is a clear sign they want to grow spiritually as a couple.
- *Discuss your capabilities as a leader.* Tell them that you want them to continue to grow in their marriage, but you think they'd benefit from working with someone who has more expertise than you can provide.
- *Share what you've seen.* Be specific. Tell the couple that you've observed unresolved conflict or unhealthy communication. They may try to explain away what you've seen. Let them know you aren't there to condemn or assign blame, but to ask them to consider taking a next step.
- *Encourage them to pursue Christian counseling.* Tell them that you think they would benefit from meeting with a Christian counselor. Let them know that you're willing to contact the church on their behalf in order to get the name of a counselor in their area. The church may even be able to provide some financial assistance. It's important to note that we want couples to find a recommended *Christian* counselor.
- *Make it personal.* If you've benefited from the wisdom of a counselor, share your experiences. Some people have preconceived notions about counseling. Demystify false beliefs by talking about your own experiences. We prioritize the health of our bodies by having yearly physicals. Counseling is just a way to prioritize the health of our marriages.
- *Help them to determine their best next step.* If the couple is open to seeing a counselor, help them to decide on their next step. Commit to following up with them to ensure they take this step.
- *Provide followup.* These conversations can be awkward, but they're one of the best ways you can care for your group members. Some couples think that one trip to a counselor will fix their marriage. That's not the case. Usually, couples should plan for at least six meetings with a Christian counselor. If they don't feel a connection with a specific counselor, encourage them to try a different one. Make sure to follow up with them about their visits. Encourage them to prioritize those meetings.

When working with a couple who needs help in their marriage, keep your Groups Director in the loop. He or she can help connect the couple with our Care Ministry, who can then help them to find a Christian counselor. Your Groups Director will also support you as you support your group members.

