

## **Marriage Counseling with Step-Couples**

A “Blindspot” in the Marriage Counseling

5 Key Differences & Challenges in Counseling Step-Couples

1. Honeymoon
2. Former Spouses
3. Two Full-Formed Family Cultures
4. Insider–Outsider Experiences
5. Grief/Loss & Loyalty Binds

Do Stepfamily Couples Really “Blend”?

[An In-Depth Understanding] **Five Stepfamily Tasks**

1. Persevering through to the Honeymoon
2. Collaborating with Another Parent (who does not live with us)
  - The No. 1 factor in how children adjust after a remarriage is the level of conflict between their parents (who no longer live in the same household).
  - Parallel parenting may be the best way to coparent when the parents are unable to collaboratively parent.
  - Major decisions should be made by parents with stepparents as “advisors.”

- Father–child relationships are especially vulnerable following divorce and remarriage.

### 3. Building a Shared Home Culture (Conflict)

- “How we do things” and “how things *should* be done” is firmly established... between the parent and child(ren), not between the husband or wife or step-relationships.
- The step-couple must honor and maintain separate traditions and values and rhythms even as they slowly (emphasis on slowly) build a shared culture.
- If needed, operate two separate sets of rules within the same household to maintain some sense of normalcy. Then slowly start to create a coherent culture from the two.

### 4. Bonding: An Insider–Outsider Position/Experience

- When counseling a step-couple, the strength of *their* bond is not the only (or even most important) bond to consider.
- The parent-child bond can *rival* and *compete* with the couple’s bond.
- The couple lives on the opposite sides of the experiential divide.
  - o Outsider (stepparent)
  - o Insider (parent)
  - o Myth: “*If the couple is doing well, the family will do well*”

- o Increase 1:1 time: between couple, between parent–child, and between stepparent–stepchild(ren)
  
- o Limit physical (and verbal) affection between spouses

5. Deep Understanding: Joy & Celebration (vs.) Change & Loss

- Consider the deep losses (for children) on multiple levels.
  
- A “resistant” child is often a struggling child.

Progressive Discipline [matching warmth with structure/firmness]

- Parenting polarizes step-couples.
  
- For stepparents: “connection over correction” (Patricia Papernow, Ed.D.).

The Importance of Education in Step-Couple Counseling

Be caution when doing *individual* counseling...

**Sexual Intimacy in Marriage Counseling**

Two Common **[Faulty]** Assumptions:

1. As couples grow in nonsexual areas of their marriage (e.g., communication, constructive conflict, understanding, etc.), this growth will automatically transfer into their sexual relationship.
2. Counselors do *not* need to address a couple's sexual relationship directly.
  - ⇒ Start early in counseling and come back to this question from time to time. Do not push/pressure.
  - ⇒ For Example: "*Many couples talk to me about not feeling much sexual desire for one another after having been married for a while...God's desire is that sex would be something special between a husband and wife in all seasons of life. We can talk more about this at some point if you'd like...*"

**Truth:** Unless we inquire and explicitly help couples in this area of their marriage, their sexual relationship may not improve.

[1 Cor 7: 1–5] The Corinthians ask Paul directly about sexless marriages.

- By design, a life lived together in marriage was meant to be intimate.
- Prioritizing (becoming deliberate about) regular sexual intimacy provides a protective element for couples.
- Radical mutuality and equality are to characterize a couple's sexual relationship.

The Wisdom of Sexual Intimacy in Marriage (from the Song of Songs)

1. There is *no discrepancy* between the man and woman as regards sexual desire, initiating sex, or sexual activity. (This is a restoration of Gen 2:25, "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.")
2. Safety, security, and faithful devotion are essential to sexual intimacy. "*My beloved is mine, and I am his.*"
3. Sex does *not* exist apart from the broader relationship between a couple. It is a fruit of their love for one another. Sexual intimacy works in the opposite direction as well—sexual intimacy fosters a closer, more intimate marriage. And yet consult and team up with:

- a. Urologist & Gynecologist
  - b. Physical Therapist
  - c. Psychiatrist
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4. The Song of Songs uses two images to depict a couple's sexual relationship: a garden and a well of water. God intends that a couple's sexual relationship be a means of grace to/for their marriage.
  
  5. Sexual desire is more often responsive than spontaneous.

Helping couples discuss their sexual relationship by speaking of sexual desire as two processes:

1. Sexual Accelerator
  
2. Sexual Brake (inhibitors)
  - a. Internal
  
  - b. External
    - i. Relational
  
    - ii. Contextual