

Addressing the Needs of Adult Children of Divorce in Premarital Counseling: Research-Based Guidelines for Practice

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Abstract:

Because of high divorce rates during the past several decades, a significant number of clients seeking premarital counseling are entering marriage in the context of having experienced parental divorce. Existing research indicates that adult children of divorce are at an elevated risk for divorce and marital distress. In this literature review article, the authors present recommendations for premarital counselors who work with couples in which one or both partners have experienced parental divorce. The authors base their recommendations on the existing literature that examines the attitudes and experiences of adult children of divorce.

Keywords: adult children of divorce; premarital counseling; risk for divorce; marital distress

Article:

Divorce has been a widely researched topic during the past 30 years. Because of high prevalence rates, immediate and long-term effects on children, and social and economic implications, divorce is unquestionably an important topic for couple and family counselors to consider. In many ways, divorce has become the norm in modern America (Amato, 1999). Divorce rates peaked in the early 1980s and have remained steady at around 50% since then (Pinsof, 2002). With the median age at first marriage hovering at around 26 for women and 28 for men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006), the current generation of young adults entering into marriage has grown up in a culture in which divorce is common. Many who experienced the divorce of their parents may be concerned about how the shadow of their parents' divorce will affect their own marital choices.

These concerns can come to the forefront as couples enter into marriage and begin to consider their hopes and expectations for their future marriages. Therefore, the need for premarital counselors to be familiar with the unique needs, challenges, and experiences of adult children of divorce (ACOD) is high. In this article, we use the abbreviation *ACOD* to refer to adults who experienced the divorce of their parents. This article provides considerations for premarital counselors working with ACOD based on existing research with this population. The article begins with general background information about ACOD and premarital counseling. Next, the limited available research that studies ACOD in premarital counseling is reviewed. The subsequent section summarizes the more expansive general body of literature on ACOD to identify research-based guidelines for premarital counseling practice with this population. The literature we reviewed on ACOD focuses primarily on those who experienced parental divorce during childhood, although some of this research also includes adults whose parents divorced after the children reached adulthood. Throughout this article, we use the terms *never-divorced* or *still-married* parents or families to refer to adults who did not experience parental divorce.

ACOD have been identified as a population that is at an elevated risk for marital distress and divorce (VanWidenfelt & Hosman, 1996). They are more likely to divorce themselves than offspring from families in which the parents remain married (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Bumpass & Martin, 1991; Stanley & Fincham, 2002; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000; Wolfinger, 2000). This relationship generally holds even when a number of variables are controlled for, such as education, income, and parental marital quality (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Wolfinger, 2000). Given these intergenerational risk factors, prevention strategies such as

premarital counseling can give ACOD an opportunity to develop strategies for enhancing the future strength of their own marriages. Premarital counseling involves “a therapeutic couple intervention that occurs with couples who plan to marry” (Murray & Murray, 2004, p. 349). The aim of premarital counseling is to help premarital couples strengthen their relationships to prevent marital distress and promote stronger relationship assets once they are married (Murray, 2005; Murray & Murray, 2004).

Premarital counseling offers numerous potential benefits to ACOD as they prepare to transition into marriage. The general benefits of premarital counseling include helping couples appreciate the significance of the relationship they are about to enter, informing couples about useful resources to support their relationships when a needs arise at a later time, and helping couples to develop strategies to minimize relationship distress once they marry (Stanley, 2001). Premarital counseling programs typically are either standardized and based on a structured curriculum or individualized and tailored to the unique needs of each couple. Standardized programs such as the widely used Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (Renick, Blumberg, & Markman, 1992) have been shown to be effective at producing positive outcomes for pre-marital couples (Stanley, 2001; Stanley et al., 2001). However, scholars have advocated for the increased use of individualized programs that focus attention on the unique needs of each couple (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Murray, 2004, 2006). These scholars suggest that standardized programs may pay inadequate attention to the unique challenges facing each couple (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). For example, an engaged couple in which one or both partners experience conflict with family members may not be able to address these issues in a standardized program focusing on communication skills. Premarital counselors have indicated that a wide range of background characteristics can influence a couple’s needs in premarital counseling (Murray, 2004), which suggests that practitioners must consider the unique needs of each couple.

This article draws on the extensive body of literature on ACOD to identify guidelines for the practice of premarital counseling with ACOD. A challenge in interpreting the literature on ACOD is that previous research has provided many contradictory findings. Many of these unclear findings are likely because of the common methodological limitations found in this body of literature, which include sampling biases, nonstandard measurement, cohort effects, self-selection biases, confounds such as conflict and predivorce functioning, under-representation of males in samples, minimal use of qualitative methodologies, and overreliance on college students as study participants (Brown, 2000; Bumpass & Martin, 1991; Christensen & Brooks, 2001; Stanley & Fincham, 2002). Given these limitations, we describe methodological issues where relevant in an attempt to assist with interpreting and applying the findings to guide premarital counseling practice.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH EXAMINING ACOD IN PREMARITAL COUNSELING

A small and inclusive body of research exists that explores the experiences of ACOD in premarital counseling. Halford, Sanders, and Behrens (2001) conducted a randomized con-trolled trial of a premarital program, comparing outcomes for high-risk and low-risk couples. These researchers defined a high-risk couple as one in which there was either parental divorce in the woman’s family of origin or physical aggression in the man’s family of origin. High-risk couples who participated in the program showed less negative communication than did control couples after 1 year and less erosion of relationship satisfaction after 4 years. Low-risk couples who participated in the program improved communication following the intervention, but these improvements diminished after 12 months. Participation in the program had no effect on whether or not couples remained together after 4 years. The results of this study, although based on a small sample size, suggest that couples including ACOD may benefit from premarital interventions, perhaps to a greater extent than couples with no history of parental divorce.

A study by VanWidenfelt and Hosman (1996) provides different findings. These researchers used a Dutch population to look at different effects of a premarital prevention program for at-risk couples (defined as couples in which one member had experienced parental divorce) compared to nonrisk couples. This study employed random selection to the intervention or control group. At the first follow-up assessment 9 months following the intervention, the at-risk couples showed greater problem intensity, decreased problem-solving abilities, and increased psychological symptoms. At this follow-up, nonrisk couples showed the opposite, positive effects. At

the time of the second follow-up (nearly 2 years following the intervention), there were no significant differences between groups. In contrast to the Halford et al. (2001) study, this study suggests that couples including an adult child of divorce may actually experience negative outcomes through a premarital intervention program.

Researchers have also examined whether experiences of parental divorce influence premarital couples' rates of attendance in premarital counseling or preferences for the type of premarital counseling they attend. In their study of 374 newly married couples, Halford, O'Donnell, Lizzio, and Wilson (2006) examined whether females' experiences of parental divorce influenced rates of attendance at premarital education programs. These researchers found that there were no significant differences in premarital education attendance based on experiences of female parental divorce. Duncan and Wood (2003) studied the relationships between preferences in premarital counseling and marital distress risk factors related to family-of-origin experiences (including history of parental divorce) among 964 never-married college students. Their findings suggest that individuals who have experienced parental divorce may differ in their motivation to attend premarital counseling, although experiences of parental divorce generally did not influence participants' preferences for the type or location of premarital preparation programs. A notable exception to this trend was that individuals who had experienced parental divorce demonstrated a significantly greater preference for personalized, as opposed to group, approaches.

RESEARCH-BASED GUIDELINES FOR PREMARITAL COUNSELING WITH ACOD

The limited available research that looks specifically at ACOD in premarital counseling offers minimal practical guidance to premarital counselors looking to develop appropriate interventions and approaches for this population. On the other hand, the more general body of research examining the attitudes and experiences of ACOD is quite broad and, as noted previously, often encompasses contradictory findings. Therefore, we summarize this body of research in this section, with an emphasis on practical application, to facilitate the usefulness of this body of research for providers of pre-marital counseling. We organize our review into six research-based guidelines for premarital counseling practice. In this section, we use the term *clients* to refer to ACOD and their partners in premarital counseling.

Guideline 1: Explore Clients' Attitudes Toward Marriage and Intimate Relationships

Much of the existing research suggests that ACOD hold less positive or more ambivalent attitudes regarding marriage (e.g., Berner, 1992; Christensen & Brooks, 2001; Gelfman, 1995) as compared to individuals who have not experienced parental divorce. For example, ACOD may prefer to cohabitate rather than to marry, be disinterested in marriage at all, believe that marriage does not last a lifetime, or view divorce as a plausible option (Christensen & Brooks, 2001). Other attitudes that researchers have studied among ACOD include caution toward romantic relationships, concerns about their own marriages ending, and lower expectations for marital satisfaction (Gelfman, 1995; Russell, 2001). However, many studies also have found that there are few if any differences in attitudes toward marriage between adults who hail from divorced and never-divorced families (Burgoyne & Hames, 2002; Landis-Kleine, Foley, Nall, Padgett, & Walters-Palmer, 1995). Results of a study by Boyer-Pennington, Pennington, and Spink (2001) indicated that participants from both never-divorced and divorced families held positive expectations about the quality of future marriage, although these findings were stronger for participants from never-divorced families. Another study, by Stone and Hutchinson (1992), revealed no differences in attitudes toward marriage between offspring of divorced and still-married families, even when controlling for past and present levels of family conflict.

One plausible explanation for the contradictory findings regarding the differences between ACOD and adult children from never-divorced families is that parental marital quality may be more important than marital status in determining offspring attitudes toward marriage. Studies that do not control for parental marital quality may therefore provide an incomplete picture of the impact of parental divorce. Sprecher, Cate, and Levin (1998) demonstrated that adult children from unhappy, still-married families are more like ACOD in their beliefs about love than they are like adult offspring from happy, still-married families. Another study showed that parental marital unhappiness is associated with less commitment to marriage, lower levels of marital stability, and more

disagreements (Booth & Edwards, 1989). These findings suggest that parental marital quality is an important influence on clients' attitudes toward marriage and relationships, whether or not the parents are divorced.

Another methodological limitation that may contribute to the mixed findings on this topic is that studies may fail to account for gender differences in experiences of parental divorce. Although a few studies have found no disparity between the effect of divorce on adult male and female offspring (Johnson & McNeil, 1998; King, 2002), the preponderance of evidence suggests that gender differences exist (Christensen & Brooks, 2001; Conway, Christensen, & Herlihy, 2003). For example, in contrast to men, female ACOD appear to have lower marital stability and quality (Booth & Edwards, 1989). These differences between males' and females' experiences of parental divorce may contribute to some of the contradictory findings discussed above depending on the composition of study samples and whether researchers statistically control for gender in their data analyses.

Attitudes and beliefs toward marriage are important topics to address in premarital counseling (Murray, 2006), and this may be particularly true for ACOD in light of the research findings discussed above. When working with ACOD in pre-marital counseling, it is therefore recommended that providers discuss the following types of attitudes toward marriage and relationships: (a) their confidence in their ability to have a positive relationship, (b) their expectations for future marital satisfaction, and (c) their beliefs about the purpose of marriage. Given the inconclusive nature of the findings about the attitudes toward marriage among ACOD, providers should ask clients about their perceptions of the influence of their parents' divorce on their attitudes, with special consideration given to clients' perceptions of their parents' marital quality and the role of gender on these influences.

Guideline 2: Explore Clients' Beliefs About Divorce and Marital Commitment

The research on the effects of parental divorce on offspring attitudes toward divorce and marital commitment is also mixed. In part, these mixed findings may result from researchers studying different aspects of attitudes toward divorce and marital commitment. Some of the existing research indicates that ACOD are neither more nor less likely to be in favor of divorce compared to those from still-married families (Burgoyne & Hames, 2002; Landis-Kleine et al., 1995; Stone & Hutchinson, 1992). However, other research suggests that ACOD may hold more positive and accepting attitudes toward divorce (Christensen & Brooks, 2001; Gelfman, 1995; Stanley & Fincham, 2002). Darlington (2001) found that ACOD tend not to want repeat their patterns of divorce, although many develop ideas about how they would act in the event that they did divorce themselves. Many believe that they would have a more positive divorce than their parents if one were to occur (Berner, 1992). Duran-Aydintug (1997) found that ACOD who hold more negative attitudes toward divorce are more likely to have had parents whose marriage was high in conflict. The majority of participants in a qualitative study by Burgoyne and Hames (2002) reported that they were not in favor of divorce, nor was it viewed as a convenient escape from marriage, but they recognized it as a "necessary option" when a marriage cannot be saved.

Researchers who study the levels of commitment to marriage exhibited by ACOD typically hypothesize that ACOD are less committed to marriage than individuals from still-married families. In support of this hypothesis, Amato and DeBoer (2001) found that differing levels of commitment to marriage contributed to an increased divorce rate in off-spring of divorced parents. Jacquet and Surra (2001), on the other hand, found no difference in the commitment levels reported by adult children from divorced and never-divorced families. According to these researchers, ACOD tend to experience more ambivalence about serious involvement and fear of commitment in light of their firsthand understanding of the fragility of intimate relationships; however, once involved in a relationship, participants in this study were found to be equally committed to staying with their partners as adults from intake families.

Although preparing for marriage inherently involves partners making a commitment to one another, discussion of clients' levels of commitment to their future marriage remains an important topic to address in premarital counseling (Murray, 2006). Despite the contradictory findings described in this section, at least some aspects of

clients' attitudes toward divorce and marital commitment are likely to have been shaped by their firsthand experience of parental divorce. Questions that premarital counselors may ask their clients to explore these attitudes include the following: (a) To what extent do you think that divorce is an option for married couples to consider when they are experiencing difficulties in their relationships? (b) What do you think are the reasons that so many couples today do get divorced? (c) What influence do you think that your parents' divorce has had on your own beliefs about divorce? and (d) What did you learn about commitment to marriage based on your parents' marriage?

Guideline 3: Discuss Clients' Relationship History and Patterns

Certain relationship experiences and dynamics appear to be more likely among those who have experienced parental divorce, and some of these have the potential to contribute to negative relationship outcomes. Therefore, premarital counseling offers ACOD an opportunity to explore these patterns and, as is discussed in the next guideline, develop strategies for strengthening their relationships. The intimate relationships of ACOD may move at a more rapid pace than adults from never-married families. For example, ACOD have been found to marry at an earlier age than adult children from nondivorced families (Christensen & Brooks, 2001; Conway et al., 2003). Also, at earlier ages, ACOD tend to engage in activities that lead to marriage, such as leaving home, leaving school, heightened sexual activity, and cohabitation (Christensen & Brooks, 2001; Conway et al., 2003). All of these circumstances seem to contribute to ACOD marrying sooner than their counterparts from never-divorced families. Researchers have proposed several reasons for this apparent eagerness to marry, including a desire for relationships to meet the emotional needs for affection (Christensen & Brooks, 2001) and a need for assurance of commitment from their partners (Conway et al., 2003). Age of marriage is an important issue premarital counselors to consider, given the fact that early marriage is a known risk factor for divorce (Bumpass and Martin, 1991).

The most common relationship dynamics studied among ACOD include trust levels and relationship insecurities. ACOD tend to experience less trust in their intimate relationships as compared to adult children from never-divorced families (Christensen & Brooks, 2001). The feelings of trauma and helplessness experienced by a child after the parental divorce may contribute to feelings of helplessness in adult relationships (Brown, 2000), and ACOD may face much insecurity as they adjust to adult life (Berner, 1992). Most of the ACOD in one study experienced difficulties trusting others and were somewhat fearful of commitment (Duran-Aydintug, 1997). van Schaick and Stolberg (2001) found that adults whose parents are divorced are more likely to have greater insecurity, less trust, and increased avoidance and anxiety in relationships. In a study of married couples, Webster, Orbuch, and House (1995) found that ACOD were much more likely to fear that they had a troubled marriage than adults who had not experienced parental divorce. Upon integrating their findings with prior research the researchers speculated that "children of divorce have higher rates of divorce not because their marriages are less happy, but rather because of a higher propensity to divorce that stems from a reluctance, given their fear of failure, to fully commit to marriage" (p. 427). However, parental marital quality and the quality of the relationship between the adult children and their parents appear to influence the impact of parental divorce on levels of trust and insecurities in the relationships of ACOD, with less negativity between parents and greater positive involvement between the offspring and their parents serving as protective factors (King, 2002; van Schaick & Stolberg, 2001).

One strategy for examining relationship history and pace is to construct a timeline that includes significant events in the clients' relationship history (e.g., when they met, when they agreed to a monogamous relationship, when they moved in together if the couple is cohabiting, and when they became engaged). Extending the timeline further into the past to include additional events in each partner's individual life that preceded the relationship may also offer important clues into the history of the couple's relationship and its possible connections with family-of-origin experiences. To identify the dynamics of the clients' relationship, interview and observational strategies can be used. Interview questions can address the clients' perceptions and reports about their interactional style (e.g., "What usually happens when you disagree?" "To what extent do you feel that your partner trusts you?" and "When you feel that your needs are not being considered by your partner, how do you usually respond?"). To supplement these questions, a premarital counselor may ask the clients to

work on some problem-solving strategies (examples of which can be found in Gottman, 1999), and then observe the clients to identify relevant interactional patterns. If potentially troublesome patterns are identified, the counselor can work with the clients to develop more effective skills, as is discussed in the next section.

Guideline 4: Assist Clients in Developing and Practicing Relationship Skills

Compared to those who have not experienced parental divorce, ACOD may have deficits in conflict resolution and communication skills within their intimate relationships. The level of conflict in the family of origin influences the preferred style of conflict resolution by the adult offspring (Christensen & Brooks, 2001). Wallerstein et al. (2000) asserted that ACOD often lack the conflict resolution skills needed to manage differences within intimate relationships, as conflicts in divorcing families are often never resolved or openly discussed. Parental divorce may also influence off-spring communication skills in general. Researchers have found that females whose parents are divorced have higher levels of invalidation, more negative nonverbal behaviors, and more withdrawal than females whose parents are still married (Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1999). In addition, couples involving a female who experienced parental divorce tend to exhibit less constructive communication, more demand-withdraw interactions, and mutual avoidance (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002). Thus, parental divorce appears to have a more negative impact on the communication skills of females than males (Sanders et al., 1999).

A focus on enhancing clients' conflict management and communication skills appears to be particularly relevant for ACOD in premarital counseling. Premarital counselors should begin by identifying any areas in which clients appear to be lacking skills in conflict management and communication. These areas may include listening, using clear and direct communication, using assertiveness, managing verbal aggression, and staying on task during a conflict. Once problematic behaviors have been identified, premarital counselors can work with clients to develop more effective relationship skills. Readers are encouraged to consult Gottman (1999) for information about research-based approaches for improving clients' relationship skills. If time permits, clients can practice these new skills during the premarital counseling sessions so that the premarital counselor can offer further guidance for improving their interactional style. Although they are not a primary focus of much of the available research on ACOD, additional relationship skills that are important to address in premarital counseling include problem-solving skills and coping skills (Murray, 2006).

Guideline 5: Develop Strategies for Promoting Positive Relationships With Family Members

Family-of-origin relationship issues may arise as a couple prepares for their marriage and wedding. The existing research suggests that ACOD may experience challenges in their relationships with family members, so clients in premarital counseling may require assistance in developing more positive family relationships. According to Bowen family systems theory, differentiation, which is shaped primarily through family-of-origin experiences, is "the ability to be in emotional contact with others yet still autonomous in one's emotional functioning" (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 145). Johnson and colleagues (Johnson & McNeil, 1998; Johnson & Nelson, 1998; Johnson, Thorngren, & Smith, 2001; Johnson, Wilkinson, & McNeil, 1995) have studied the impact of parental divorce on adult children's differentiation levels. In general, ACOD appear to have more difficulty with the developmental task attainment of differentiation than their counterparts from still-married families. ACOD also are more likely to be emotion-ally cut off, have lower levels of intimacy, and are more emotionally reactive. In addition, young adults from divorced families demonstrate less intergenerational intimacy, intergenerational individuation, peer intimacy, and peer individuation than young adults from still-married families. The impact of parental divorce on offspring differentiation level appears to be influenced by age at the time of divorce, postdivorce family structure, and level of family conflict.

Premarital counseling offers ACOD an opportunity to reflect on relevant family relationships and develop strategies for navigating the family relationship transitions that will occur with the upcoming marriage. Through a Bowen family systems theory lens (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), the pre-marital counselor can help clients view the transition to marriage as an opportunity to develop greater differentiation and more positive family relationships. Some strategies that a premarital counselor may use include helping clients to (a) communicate effectively with family members, (b) develop strategies for managing conflicts that may arise as the new spouse

is incorporated into the family, (c) plan how major events and traditions within each partner's family will be managed, and (d) identify sources of practical and emotional support within each partner's family that can provide resources for the clients' marriage.

Guideline 6: Recognize and Mobilize the Unique Strengths of ACOD

As is evident from much of the research reviewed, previous researchers studying ACOD have tended to focus on negative outcomes. However, long-term dysfunction is not an inherent consequence for adults who as children experienced the divorce of their parents. Many offspring develop resiliency (Emery, 1999), grow to recognize the importance of effective communication in relationships (Darlington, 2001), hold more realistic beliefs and attitudes toward marriage than those from still-married families (Sprecher et al., 1998), and experience satisfying, enduring relationships, characterized by commitment, friendship, humor, effective communication, hard work, and compatible beliefs (Zink, 2000). Additional relationship assets include increased independence (Berner, 1992), maturity, self-efficacy, hardiness, empathy, and androgyny (Gately & Schwebel, 1992). These gains can be attributed to the experience of coping successfully with the aftermath and adapting to the changes that accompany parental divorce (Conway et al., 2003). Without negating the challenges faced by ACOD, it is important for premarital counselors to bear in mind that close to 80% of these individuals "do not suffer from major psychological problems, have achieved their education and career goals, . . . enjoy intimate relationships, have not divorced, and do not appear to be scarred with immutable negative effects from divorce" (Kelly & Emery, 2003, pp. 357-358).

Because parental divorce does not necessarily lead to pathology and severe relationship problems, we recommend that premarital counselors working with ACOD adopt a strength-based approach that focuses on the resiliency and resources that the couple brings to the relationship. We encourage counselors to help their clients identify the strengths and resources they developed as they faced the challenges associated with parental divorce and to consider how these strengths can be used to strengthen the couple's upcoming marriage. A solution-focused approach to premarital counseling can be used to identify these resources and assist couples in developing strategies to utilize them within their marriage (Murray & Murray, 2004).

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PREMARITAL COUNSELING WITH ACOD

We conclude with nine general recommendations for premarital counselors when working with ACOD. First, we urge premarital counselors not to make any predetermined assumptions about ACOD. The literature reviewed demonstrates that, although certain trends can be found, there is wide variability in the manner and degree to which parental divorce influences children. Therefore, our second recommendation is for premarital counselors to ask their clients what they think the influences of their parents' divorces could be on their future marriages as well as on their current experiences as they prepare to marry. As part of this discussion, premarital counselors can address the role the client played in the parents' divorce, the client's beliefs about divorce resulting from those experiences, the recency of the divorce and other developmental issues, and relationship skills that the client would like to develop through premarital counseling.

Third, we recommend that premarital counselors maintain familiarity with new and emerging literature that examines the needs of ACOD as they enter marriage. The body of literature examining ACOD is growing constantly (Christensen & Brooks, 2001; Conway et al., 2003), and new findings can provide new directions for practice. Familiarity with the literature will also help premarital counselors identify important areas for assessment when working with this population, which relates to our fourth recommendation of conducting a thorough assessment of the unique needs of each adult child of divorce who enters premarital counseling. The use of formal premarital assessment instruments—such as the PREParation for Marriage Questionnaire (Holman, Busby, & Larson, 1989), the RELATE assessment (Holman et al., 2001), and the Premarital Personal and Relationship Evaluation (Olson, Fournier, & Druckman, 1986)—can be combined with open-ended assessment strategies to identify the most significant needs each couple demonstrates in premarital counseling. A fifth strategy is constructing a genogram that examines relationship patterns of divorce within each partner's family of origin (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Shellenberger, 1999). When processing the genogram with the couple, the pre-marital counseling provider can help the couple identify exceptions to patterns of divorce. For example,

the provider may ask, “Who has really strong, lasting marriages within your families? How did they manage to do it?” In a related strategy, our sixth recommendation is for premarital counselors to help couples to seek out examples of strong relationships that they can use as models for their own marriage—both within and outside of the clients’ families of origin. These strategies can be particularly helpful for clients who demonstrate anxiety about their relationship abilities because they lack positive models of healthy, lasting, and satisfying marriages.

Our seventh recommendation is for premarital counselors working with this population to help clients to identify learning experiences that they can take away from negative experiences they encountered through their parents’ divorces. For example, clients who remember feeling extreme emotional distress as children when their parents had hostile arguments in front of them may transform these experiences into personal commitments to use positive conflict management strategies. Eighth, we recommend that premarital counselors help clients identify possible early warning signs of distress in their relationship and develop a plan for working through these. Clients can draw on their experiences of their parents’ divorces to identify early clues—such as avoiding time together, being unable to come to agreeable resolutions to conflicts, and experiencing overwhelming feelings of negativity toward one’s partner—that their relationships may be heading for distress.

Once couples have identified the signs likely to indicate distress in their own relationships, they can develop strategies to change their relationships in more positive ways—such as by setting aside a regular time to talk about the relationship, seeking counseling for help in managing conflict, and attempting to increase positive feelings toward one’s partner by remembering his or her positive assets.

Finally, we recommend that premarital counselors help to link couples with relevant resources within the local community and online (e.g., Web sites, support groups, follow-up counselors, books, networks of other couples). These resources can further help to normalize the experiences of ACOD and assist them in building supportive resources to help sustain their marriages for years to come.

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