

PASTORAL DISCERNMENT COUNSELING SESSION

2 HOURS

COUPLE TOGETHER (35 MIN.)

1. Informal chatting
2. Prayer (if appropriate)
3. Their goals: *“Could you each say what you hope will come out of our conversation today? What do you hope will happen here? Either of you can start.”*
4. Explain the process for this session: together, then each separately, and back together.
5. Divorce narrative: *“What has happened to your marriage that has gotten you to the point where divorce is a possibility?”* Each responds separately; pastor mainly listens.
6. Repair narrative: *“What have you done to try to solve your problems and keep from getting to this point? This may be what you’ve done individually, as a couple, or with outside help.”* Take note of lack of effective help in the past, or help not accessed well.
7. Children question: *“What role, if any, do your children play in your decision making about the future of your marriage?”* The leaning-in spouse usually chimes in first. Just listen and then ask the other person. The goal is to bring the needs of the children into the conversation without much commentary from you at this point. (You don’t want the leaning-out spouse to feel cornered.) You can return to this issue in the individual conversations when appropriate.
8. Best of times: *“What was the best of times since you first became a couple, a time when you felt the most joy and connection?”* To create a positive mood for what comes next. Steer them back to this positive question if they stray into negatives.
9. Describe three paths that will be the focus of the rest of the session:
path one: the marriage as it has been; path two: separation/divorce;
path three: six month of work on reconciliation with divorce off the table.
10. Transition to individual time with the leaning-out spouse.

DISCERNMENT Counseling

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LEANING-OUT SPOUSE ALONE (35 MIN.)

1. Empathy for their distress.
2. Focus on the three paths, not the marital problems—in other words, the future, not the past.
3. Different responses for soft versus hard reasons (hard = abuse, affairs, addictions; soft = growing apart, poor communication, personality differences, etc.)
4. Limits of prior repair efforts.
5. Talk about available support resources in the congregation: from you and the congregation.
6. Ask which path the spouse is leaning towards now. Accept whatever they say. If not embracing path three, ask if they are willing to keep thinking and praying about it.

LEANING-IN SPOUSE ALONE (35 MIN.)

1. Empathy for the distress the person is experiencing.
2. Confirm commitment to saving the marriage and to the path 3 reconciliation effort.
3. Explore the person's understanding of their spouse's pain in the marriage; gently challenge minimizing if you hear it.
4. Different responses for soft versus hard reasons (sometimes the leaning in spouse must be challenged about his/her dysfunctional behavior—drinking, anger problems, etc.— and other times challenged to understand what the spouse is saying in “softer” areas such as not being emotionally present.)
5. Emphasize self-responsibility: the leaning-in spouse has to focus on bringing their best self to the crisis, focusing on self-care and self-learning and not obsessing about the other spouse, neither pursuing nor distancing, and being willing to look at aspects of self that need changing. Recommend Michele Weiner-Davis's book *The Divorce Remedy*.
6. Coach on what to say to the spouse at the end
7. Other resources

COUPLE TOGETHER (15 MIN.)

1. Where each is on the three paths
2. Next steps: referral, a follow up session
3. Offering church and other resources
4. Prayer

PROTOCOLS FOR THE FOLLOW UP MEETING

Scenario 1: Leaning-out spouse is still on the fence

Goals: keep hope alive, encourage further Discernment Counseling

Begin with both spouses. After a prayer, ask where each party is with discerning whether to try to save the marriage.

If the leaning-out spouse is uncertain about taking path three but not ready to divorce, ask where the other spouse is.

Assuming that the leaning-in spouse is still on board:

1. First talk to the leaning-out spouse separately. Ask *“can you tell me more about your reluctance to try path three, the six month effort, with help, to see if your marriage can be made healthy and strong?”*
2. Affirm the ambivalence: *“I can see how you are struggling because this is such an important decision for you and your family.”*
3. Ask if they would be willing to do additional Discernment Counseling with a therapist who can go into more depth. *“What I’ve done with you and your spouse is brief pastoral Discernment Counseling. Many couples need more help in discerning what direction to take with their marriage, and there are trained counselors who go into more depth than we have been able to do here. Would you be willing to try this kind of professional Discernment Counseling?”*
4. If yes, support that decision, make the referral, and offer congregational resources for their journey.
5. If no, ask what the leaning-out spouse thinks will help him/her come to a decision about a direction. Challenge if the person just wants to do it alone, for example, *“Given how hopeless you feel, it’s hard to see how you are going to come to a decision to work on your marriage (path three) unless you are calling on resources greater than your own.”*

6. Then talk with the leaning-in spouse alone. Encourage this person is to continue with the stance of neither pursuing nor distancing (as covered in the first session) and to not give an ultimatum but rather keep hope alive. Offer resources of the congregation.
7. Both parties together: Encourage taking the time needed, and say that you and the church are a resource for both of them. You will walk with them.
8. Prayer

Scenario 2: They both want to reconcile (not covered in the audio)

Goals: affirm the decision, enhance the hope, and prepare them for the reconciliation journey.

Both spouses together for the whole session.

1. After a prayer, ask where each party is with discerning whether to try to save the marriage. If both are on board, ask the leaning-out spouse, "How did you come to this decision to try to save your marriage?"
2. Affirm: *"It's wonderful that you both want to save your marriage and make it strong again. That commitment is more than half the battle."* Don't go overboard with enthusiasm, however, because the leaning-out spouse may be willing to try but may be pessimistic about the outcome.
3. Emphasize the urgency: *"I am happy that you've come to see me now instead of later when you might have felt more hopeless."* [If it feels true, say something like: *"I can feel the love and commitment you have for each other, and that's a blessing in a time of trouble. Now is the time to act."*]
4. Remind them that they are agreeing to an all-out effort over six months, with appropriate help and with divorce off the table. (See reconciliation phase principles.)
5. If there is a "hard" reason that the offending person has acknowledged (affair, addiction, etc.), emphasize that the offending person will have to sign up for serious change. Ask if they are committed to that work.
6. Emphasize that both will have to work on self: *"Here's what I have learned about what it takes to follow through on your commitment to restore your marriage to health. You will each have to learn how you contributed to the problems in your marriage in order to be part of the solutions. You will each have to work on changing yourself rather than waiting for your spouse to change."*
7. Have them read the reconciliation principles out line, each taking one at a time.

8. Offer resources (for some resources, you may have to say you will get back to them promptly).
9. Immediate homework: reading, media, prayer.
10. Say that as their pastor you will walk with them on the road ahead.
11. Reaffirm your hope for them.
12. Prayer

Scenario 3: The leaning-out spouse is out (not covered in the audio)

Goals: keep hope alive, keep the discernment process going

Start with both parties, and after a prayer, ask where each one is with discerning whether to try to save their marriage. If leaning out spouse says, "I've decided to divorce," ask where the other one is.

Assuming that the leaning-in spouse is still hanging on:

1. First talk to the leaning-out spouse separately.
2. Say, *"Tell me more about why you have decided to divorce."*
3. Ask if this has been an immediate decision or if the person can take more time for discernment.
4. Remind the person that the stakes are high and this decision has lifelong consequences for all involved.
5. In the case of soft reasons for divorce, or if the leaning out spouse is having an affair, consider challenging the decision one more time.

Examples:

- *"If right now you feel you are getting away from pain and uncertainty, I have to say that divorce is a path with a lot of pain and uncertainty."*
 - *"I am worried for you right now that you are leaving your marriage for a reason you will come to regret in the future."*
6. In the case of the hard reasons (where the other spouse is behaving badly and refusing to accept responsibility), consider asking *"Can you keep your heart open a while longer while I see if your spouse is willing to deal with their problem?"*

7. Talk to the leaning in spouse alone to give that person support for holding on if that seems appropriate, or challenge to face up to their own responsibility.
 - Empathize with the feelings involved.
 - Encourage not giving up: *“Just because someone says it’s over doesn’t mean that this is a final decision.”*
 - When there is denial of their own contributions, challenge: *“I’d like to help you save your marriage, and it’s hard to do that when you don’t seem to be opening your heart and mind to what you spouse is saying.”*
8. Directly ask if the person is willing to consider additional Discernment Counseling with a therapist.
9. If the door seems firmly closed, ask them together if they would like assistance in finding a mediator and coparenting help. Emphasize they have children to consider here.
10. Say that you will continue to walk with them.
11. Prayer