

RELATIONSHIPS

Ever After

Getting a little counseling before marriage

can keep couples primed for the challenges down the road **BY CAROLINE TIGER**

PEOPLE SPEND LOTS OF TIME AND money preparing for their marriage day, but not for their marriage," says Dr. Rita DeMaria, director of the PAIRS (Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills) program at the Council for Relationships in Philadelphia. Your dress, your cake, your flowers and bridesmaids' dresses—all are scrutinized down to the last buttercream rose and embroidered founce, but what about your relationship with your fiancé?

You may have fallen prey to what DeMaria calls the "myth of naturalism," the belief that if you love someone, everything else comes naturally. "But most couples are not equipped the way they need to be," she says. And if you require some training for your career, driving a car or scuba diving, then don't you need to prepare for something infinitely more complicated like marriage and family?

Engaged couples are realizing that counseling is not just for people with problems. According to a University of Denver study, 30 percent of couples receive some kind of premarital therapy, whether their church requires it or they seek it out on their own. DeMaria differentiates between therapy and relationship education. The former, which may continue beyond the wedding, is for those with deeper-seated issues, such as a family history of drug abuse or alcoholism. Sessions with a therapist can



FATHERLY ADVICE: A pep talk from *Father of the Bride*, Steve Martin, rekindled the sparks between Kimberly Williams and George Newbern, who, like many couples, needed some premarital counsel.

help couples work through the residue of their personal experience as it relates to their relationship. Education, on the other hand, is for everyone and anyone who is in a committed relationship. "Especially now, because couples are seeking a peer, an equal," says DeMaria. "That requires more cooperation and negotiation than when couples would just assume traditional gender roles. With peer partnership, everything's up for discussion."

Especially when their officiant requires it, many couples enter into a premarital preparation program with apprehension, but they often come out of the experience knowing something new about their mate and their relationship. "At least one or two light bulbs have gone off at every session," says Danielle DiLeo, who, with her fiancé, Pat, has been to three of five sessions with the Rev. Susan Cole at the Arch Street United Methodist Church in

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Philadelphia. During one of their first meetings, Cole asked the couple to introduce each other to her, including what they thought were each other's strengths and weaknesses. "It was eye-opening," DiLeo says, "to have someone else explain yourself to you." Cole encourages these kinds of exercises to show couples that it's natural for them to take different approaches to the issues they'll face together. "They've noticed the different approaches," she says, "but they may not understand that it's due to a personality difference."

At the latest session, DiLeo and her fiancé drew their family trees and talked about each interfamilial relationship—brother to father, aunt to grandmother, and on and on—as well as family illnesses. "When you're marrying you're creating a family and also uniting two families," says Cole. "It's important for each partner to understand and acknowledge who each other is in a family sense."

That includes studying each other's family traditions, which often is a point of contention after the wedding when one person is used to formal and elaborate Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving celebrations and the other is accustomed to ordering Chinese food and playing Monopoly. "These are things that are helpful for a couple to talk about in front of a third party," says Cole, who requires that all couples complete these sessions with her before she will agree to marry them.

The same basic concepts are covered in Pre-Cana programs, Catholicism's required version of premarital preparation. Pre-Cana can vary from weekend-long retreats with a few other couples to a few two-hour sessions, offered once a week, with hundreds of other brides-

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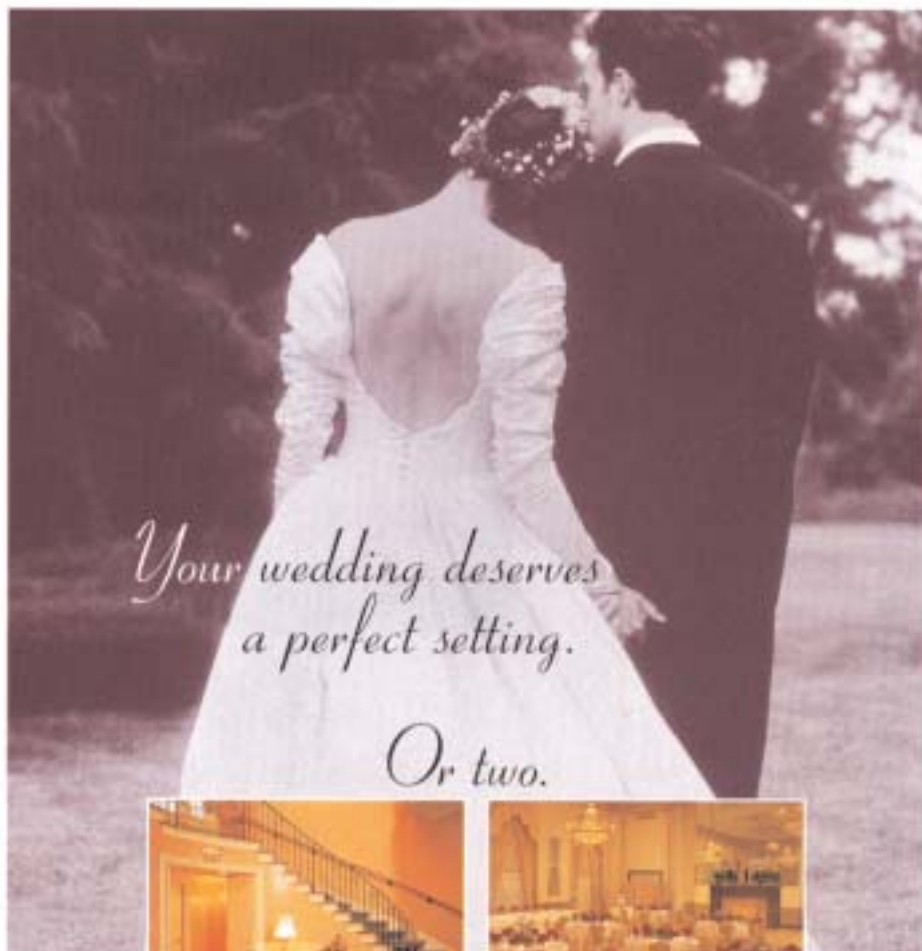
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THE BEST IS YET TO COME

If you're planning an encore wedding, your walk down the aisle most probably will be different than the first time you made the trip. Here's some helpful advice from Peggy Post's book, *Emily Post's Wedding Etiquette: Cherished Traditions and Contemporary Ideas for a Joyous Celebration* (HarperResource, 2001) to make sure your Big Day is just as beautiful the second time around.

10 GUIDELINES TO A JOYOUS ENCORE WEDDING

1. Keep it simple; don't let all the little details take over.
2. Find meaningful ways to include your children (if you have any and if they concur) in the celebrations and in your future lives.
3. Reassure family and longtime friends that they will continue to play an important part in your lives together.
4. Build your celebrations around those traditions and themes that are most meaningful to you, and have confidence in your choices. Make sure, however, that when making these choices, you have given consideration to those involved and that your choices will not alienate them or make them feel uncomfortable.
5. Be realistic about the budget—in all likelihood it's just the two of you footing the bill.
6. Make sure you have put closure on your first marriage, legally, financially and emotionally.
7. Plan together. Today, both brides and grooms are actively involved in planning their weddings.
8. Remember that thank-you notes never go out of style. A written note should be sent for every wedding gift you've received, within three months of the date of receipt of the gift. And remember, grooms can write thank-you notes, too.
9. Be sure to thank anyone who has helped out—vendors, service providers, clergy or friends—whether verbally or with a small token of appreciation.
10. When the Big Day arrives, relax and enjoy your wedding.



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and grooms-to-be. The program, run by the Rev. Vincent Genovesi, S.J. at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, is a weekendlong session for a maximum of 20 couples. On Friday night, the couples fill out "inventories," marking "agree," "disagree" or "uncertain" next to 200 statements ranging from whether or not they want kids to who will be the one to stay home and raise them.

The inventories are scored, and the couples review their answers a few weeks later with whomever will be officiating at their wedding. From Friday to Sunday, the Rev. Genovesi, along with a married couple, leads workshops and presentations on communication, conflict resolution, finances, sex and intimacy, and the notion of marriage as a sacrament. "We get them thinking about day-to-day married life," says the Rev. Genovesi. "They've been so focused on preparing for the wedding that they forget they're going to be married to each other for 40-50 years afterward."

One thread that runs through all premarital counseling programs is preparing the couple to merge their finances successfully. "Money is one of the things that couples argue about most," says Margaret Shapiro, assistant director of the Council for Relationships. She runs a workshop that focuses exclusively on money and marriage. "We work with couples to talk about and think about what money means to them and to think of ways to communicate about it," says Shapiro. "So often, money is really about something else, like feeling compe-



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tent, having self-worth, self-esteem and security."

Though it's a good idea to go through a couples course *before* you begin to have problems—DeMaria says most couples come in on average after six years of marriage—it's also important to remember that emotions run high during the wedding planning. Tracey Ellenbogen, a social worker and licensed psychotherapist in Bala Cynwyd, can attest to that. Two years ago, soon after her own wedding, she launched a workshop named Calling All Brides Stress Management Workshop. "I thought, I'm a therapist and I'm feeling a lot of anxiety, so other women must be, too," says Ellenbogen.

One workshop topic that she's dubbed, "Can I live the rest of my life with his dirty socks on the floor?" covers the common phenomenon of women who suddenly obsess over their fiance's flaws. "They need to know this is normal," says Ellenbogen. Also normal she says is wanting the perfect wedding day, having trouble finding the time to plan that perfect day and even cold feet.

Of course, premarital preparation courses have been known to reveal so much about a relationship that the couple postpones or cancels their wedding—but this happens rarely. DeMaria offers a more optimistic statistic—that couples who go through some kind of premarital education course are 50 percent less likely to divorce. It makes sense, when you think about it as gaining the skills to succeed.

Shapiro compares relationships to any good sports team. "If you start off with good communication skills, you don't have to overcome bad patterns."



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