People love a good romance. The storyline is familiar. Man and woman meet. There’s chemistry and attraction. But a crisis emerges. Some situational hardship threatens to keep them apart. Their love can’t be thwarted, however. Love fights back and overcomes the difficulties! Then the moment comes that we’ve all been waiting for: they finally get together. Hand in hand, they walk away into the sunset. And we walk away wanting to believe that from that point on they lived happily ever after. Ahhh. Happily ever after. So good. So satisfying. It’s what we all want. It’s such a wonderful story…or it would be if it were real.

Life in the real world disabuses us of the notion of “happily ever after.” No one really lives that way! If these stories were realistic, they’d show the conflicts and struggles that arise later from within the relationship, not just from external pressures. They’d show differences and incompatibilities between the two, and moments when giving up on each other seems to make the most sense. Relationships are hard. Marriage is hard work. This is not to say that there aren’t blessings, that there isn’t contentment and satisfaction. Of course there are. But if you think that a relationship could or should exist in a “happily ever after” state, you are living in a fantasy world. Sinful, broken people just aren’t capable of achieving that.

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Sustaining a healthy marriage really is hard work, and people can get stuck. They will sometimes need help to move forward. This is when marriage counseling can be helpful. Marriage counseling is one way that a couple can put forth the effort of improving how they understand, love, and live with each other.

When a couple takes initiative and enters into a season of counseling, they are demonstrating their mutual commitment and dedication to the relationship. As counselors, one way we can honor them is to be prepared. The goal of this article is to help prepare counselors for that initial meeting. I will take you through the flow of what a typical first session looks like. The details will vary, of course. There’s no script or timetable and no two couples are the same. I’ll give suggestions and descriptions of what often unfolds. I counsel in a formal counseling environment, but your context might be different. As you read, consider how to make adjustments to my recommendations that better fit into your setting and the people you are meeting with.

Before we begin to unpack the components of a first session, let me highlight what you want to have in mind as you go into that initial meeting.

**What to Keep in Mind at the Start**

More often than not, the decision to come for counseling is a difficult choice to make. Given the choice between going to a counseling session and going to the movies, most people would choose the movies. Wouldn’t you? Why is that? Because showing up for counseling reflects that something is wrong. And when something is wrong in our lives, there is potential for shame and embarrassment. Counsel-seekers are doing a very brave thing. They deserve our admiration because they have not given in to the human tendency to hide from problems. Instead, they are making a wise choice to seek help, which effectively communicates, “I’m needy. I can’t do this on my own.”

When a couple pursues marriage counseling, they are coming because the relationship is needy in some way. Put yourself in their shoes as they come in for a first meeting. Appreciate the vulnerability they are likely experiencing as they step into the room with you and begin to share their lives. They are not only going to be talking about their problems; those problems are going to be on display for you to witness! Think about that for a moment. Can you get a sense for how uncomfortable it would feel to have your problems “out
there” like that? How threatening or embarrassing it would be to have your spouse talk about you, voice grievances about you, and share concerns about the relationship?

Anticipate, then, that it is likely that one or both spouses come in feeling nervous. Some apprehensions could be about what the other spouse will do in the session:

“What is he going to say when we get in there?”

“What will she say about me?”

“What if my spouse says something that gives the counselor the wrong impression of me?”

Other apprehensions could be about what to say, and what the impact will be:

“Will I hurt my husband if I am honest with the counselor about what is really bothering me?”

“Are we going to have a fight after counseling if I put “x” on the table?”

“What if I say something that makes things even worse between us?”

Anticipating that questions like these may be on the couple’s mind will help you appreciate how intense coming to marriage counseling might feel for some people.

Also keep in mind that in individual counseling the person has more control over what is shared and at what time. But in marriage counseling, something might come out from one spouse that the other spouse wasn’t prepared to raise, isn’t ready to discuss, or doesn’t want the counselor to know. Be sensitive to this. If this happens, or it seems like one person is uncomfortable or upset by something shared, then you might want to take a moment to process it together. For example, you could say, “I noticed when your wife shared that detail, you frowned and looked over at her with a surprised face. Is there anything you’d like to say about what she shared?” This gives the husband some say over what just happened and the opportunity (if he wants to take it) to respond to or address whatever concerns he has about what his wife shared. It is also an initial way that you demonstrate that you are committed to creating and maintaining a safe counseling room with honest and open communication about what each spouse really thinks and feels.