

Discernment Counseling

What is discernment counseling?

Nearly everyone enters marriage with the dream of a lifelong union. But many couples reach a crisis point where divorce is on the table. Usually there is one “leaning-out” spouse who thinks that divorce might be the best way to move forward, and one “leaning-in” spouse who wants to preserve the marriage and make things better.

If this is your situation—one of you leaning out and the other leaning in—it’s a tough place to be. Traditional marriage counseling may not be helpful if one of you is not sure you want to work on the marriage at this point.

Fortunately, there is a new way of helping you, called **Discernment Counseling**. The goals are clarity and confidence about next steps for your relationship, based on a deeper understanding of what’s happened to your marriage and each person’s contributions to the problems. It’s not marriage counseling aiming to solve your problems or bring you closer, but a way to help you figure out whether your problems can be solved and whether you both want to try.

Discernment counseling focuses on three paths: staying married as you have been, separation or divorce, or a six-month all-out effort in couples therapy to see if you can make your marriage healthy and good for both of you. As you consider these paths in discernment counseling, you will learn more about your relationship and about yourselves as individuals. These learnings that will help you make a good decision about the future.

Discernment counseling sessions mostly involve individual conversations with the discernment counselor, along with some time as a couple. The counselor respects each person’s perspective—reasons to end the marriage and reasons to preserve it.

Discernment counseling is short term work, as brief as one session and as long as five sessions. You are only committing yourselves to one session at the outset, and then decide each time whether to return, up to a maximum of five sessions. The first session is two hours long and any subsequent sessions 1.5 hours.

For Couples

Discernment counseling is short term, and the focus is not on solving marital problems but on seeing if they could potentially be solved.

- Unlike traditional marriage counseling that assumes that both people are willing to work on the marriage, discernment counseling helps people decide whether to work on their marriage or keep moving towards divorce.
- Unlike individual counseling that usually takes one person’s side, the discernment counselor works to understand both partners, even if they see things very differently.

Who is discernment counseling for?

Discernment Counseling is for people who are considering divorce but are not completely sure if it's the right path for them. They want to take one more look before making a permanent decision with long term consequences.

It's for people who want to give their marriage another chance even though their spouse is moving towards divorce.

What does discernment counseling involve?

The discernment counselor helps individuals and couples decide whether to try to restore their marriage to health, move towards divorce, or take a time out and decide later. The sessions are divided between conversation with the couple together and individual conversations with each spouse. The counselor respects the reasons for divorce while trying to open up the possibility of restoring the marriage to health.

The counselor emphasizes the importance of each party seeing his or her own contributions to the problems and the possible solutions. This will be useful in future relationships even if this one ends. Discernment counseling is considered successful when people have clarity and confidence in their decision.

When a decision emerges, the counselor helps the parties either to find professionals who can help them have a constructive divorce or to formulate a reconciliation work plan to create a healthy, successful marriage. In some cases, couples decide to take a time out from the discernment process and return later.

How many sessions are there?

Discernment counseling involves a maximum of five counseling sessions. The first session is usually 2 hours, and subsequent sessions are 1.5 to 2 hours.

Discernment counseling is NOT suitable when

- one spouse has made a final decision to divorce and wants counseling to encourage the other spouse accept that decision
- there is a danger of domestic violence
- there is an Order of Protection from the court
- one spouse is coercing the other to participate