

3 Supporting and Saving Marriage

At the end of the day, a relatively small proportion of marriages – perhaps one in 20 – might be saved as a result of the intervention of a counsellor. The number might be less than that – we do not know ...¹

Although many hours of parliamentary debate were devoted to the need for the new legislation to do as much as possible to save marriage, no one expected that very many people would be turned back from the brink of divorce. That some couples would be, however, was sufficient justification for a distinct focus on providing information about and access to marital counselling. All the models of information meeting involved the provision of such information. Model C focused specifically on exploring with the attendee whether the marriage was over. The group presentations paid less attention to marriage support services, primarily because most of them were targeted at attendees who had already commenced divorce proceedings and were likely to include unmarried parents as well. Both CD-ROMs covered marriage support, with Model F providing the same focus as Model C. In addition, the meeting with a marriage counsellor was piloted in eight information meeting pilot areas and through the postal pack special study.

Saving Marriage: The Impact of Information Meetings

We had marriage counselling beforehand and gave up because it wasn't working. By the time I went to an information meeting, I was trying to initiate divorce, not salvage the marriage. So circumstances didn't allow me to consider counselling. (M)

I had two or three sessions with Relate, but they couldn't help me in my circumstances. I would have loved someone to help me talk to my wife. I was just desperate to get help, but my wife wasn't willing to talk. (M)

Our evaluation devoted attention to the questions of whether information increased knowledge about marriage support and the increased likelihood of attendees using marriage support services. Our data suggest that many of those who attended an information meeting had already gone some considerable way towards ending their marriage beforehand. More than half (55%) had already separated from their spouse, 34 per cent had consulted a solicitor about divorce, and 16 per cent had already begun divorce proceedings. Moreover, many had sought help in trying to save their marriage. Around one in five (21%) had been to marriage counselling within the previous year. Our telephone interviews revealed that many others had attended counselling more than a year before they applied to attend an information meeting, indicating how dealing with marital problems and ending a marriage can be a long-drawn-out process during which a range of different kinds of help might be sought.

Going to Counselling

Information about marriage support had little impact on people who had been to marriage counselling in advance of attending an information meeting. Moreover, there was no evidence that any of the models of information meeting were more effective than others in 'diverting' people to marriage counselling. It seems that counselling is more likely to be seen as an option by those who have not yet separated. Spouses living at the same address when they attended an information meeting were twice as likely as those living apart to have gone to counselling afterwards. When we conducted our time-slice survey in January 2000, 23 per cent of research respondents (N = 701) had been to counselling

¹ Mr Paul Boateng MP (Brent, South), Official Report (H.C. Standing Committee E), 7 May 1996 at col. 128.

since having attended the information meeting. Ten per cent of these people indicated that the information meeting had ‘very much’ influenced their decision to do so.

Not all of those who went to counselling did so with the hope of saving their marriage, however. As Figure 3.1 shows, men were more likely than women to go with that objective but were less likely than women to have achieved their objective. Women were more likely to have personal objectives, such as to obtain help in understanding themselves and/or their spouse or to obtain help in facing the future after their marriage had ended.

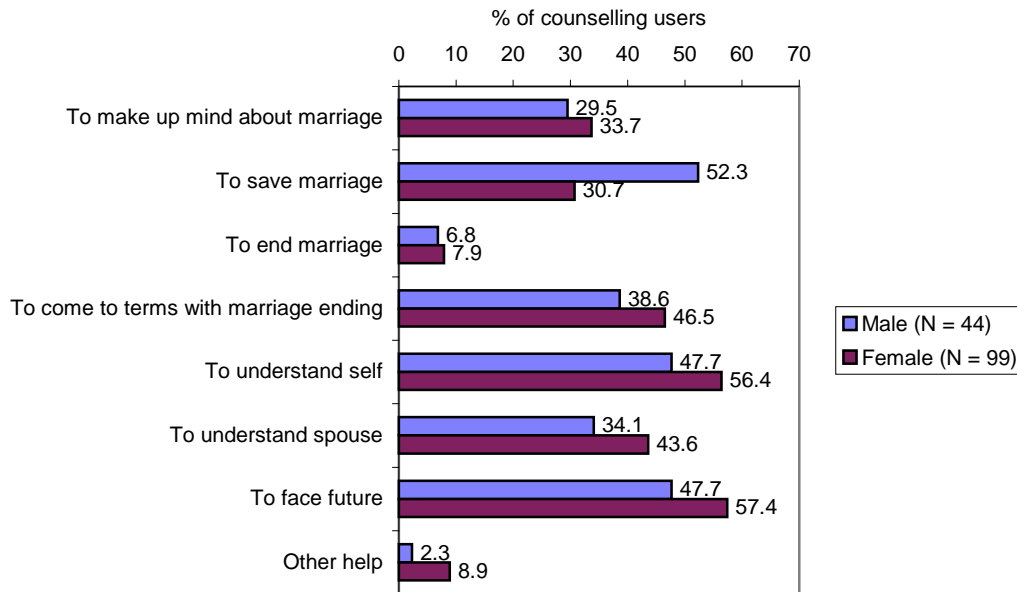


Figure 3.1 Reasons attendees gave for going to counselling

The Importance of Early Intervention

Almost half of those who went to counselling attended alone, primarily, it seems, because their partner was unwilling to participate. The evidence suggests that counselling which follows an information meeting is of limited success in saving marriages, and that the predictions of 5 per cent suggested in Parliament during the passage of the Family Law Act would seem to be a realistic target. By the time most people went to an information meeting it was too late for them to save their marriage. If the objective of providing information is to facilitate marriage saving, the evidence suggests that it will be more effective if it is provided while spouses are still together and before they make the decision to live apart. How to achieve this, however, is a question with which marriage support agencies have wrestled since their inception. Although relatively few attendees at information meetings subsequently saved their marriage through counselling, there is evidence that counselling helped people to cope with the ending of their marriage.

Meeting with a Marriage Counsellor

Both the information meeting and the marriage counsellor meeting were very beneficial in helping me to address my feelings at the time when I had not long left my husband. Although I do not see my marriage being saved, the support these services provided was invaluable in keeping me afloat emotionally. (F)

Thirty-five counsellors from six marriage agencies were trained to deliver the meeting with a marriage counsellor (MWMC). During the pilots, a total of 4,811 people, of whom 4,281 had not started divorce proceedings, received an invitation to attend a MWMC (3,465 invitations were given out at information meetings, and 1,346 were sent with the postal packs). The offer was taken up by 445 people, 26 per cent of whom were accompanied by their spouse, and consequently the number of people who attended a MWMC was 561. Women were more than twice as likely as men to attend alone.

The average take-up of the MWMC by people who had attended an information meeting was 12 per cent, although the models which focused on marriage saving (Models C and F) had higher take-up rates (17% and 16% respectively). This may have been because these information meetings focused on marriage support or because they were relatively short in duration and attendees went on to the MWMC to get more information and have their questions addressed. The take-up rate from group presentations was lower, primarily, we suspect, because many attendees had embarked on the divorce process already. Three-quarters of MWMC attendees said they were glad they had gone, but nearly half indicated that it would have been more beneficial if they had gone sooner.

The Decision To Attend a MWMC

Just under half of those who attended a MWMC went with the intention of saving their marriage (Figure 3.2).

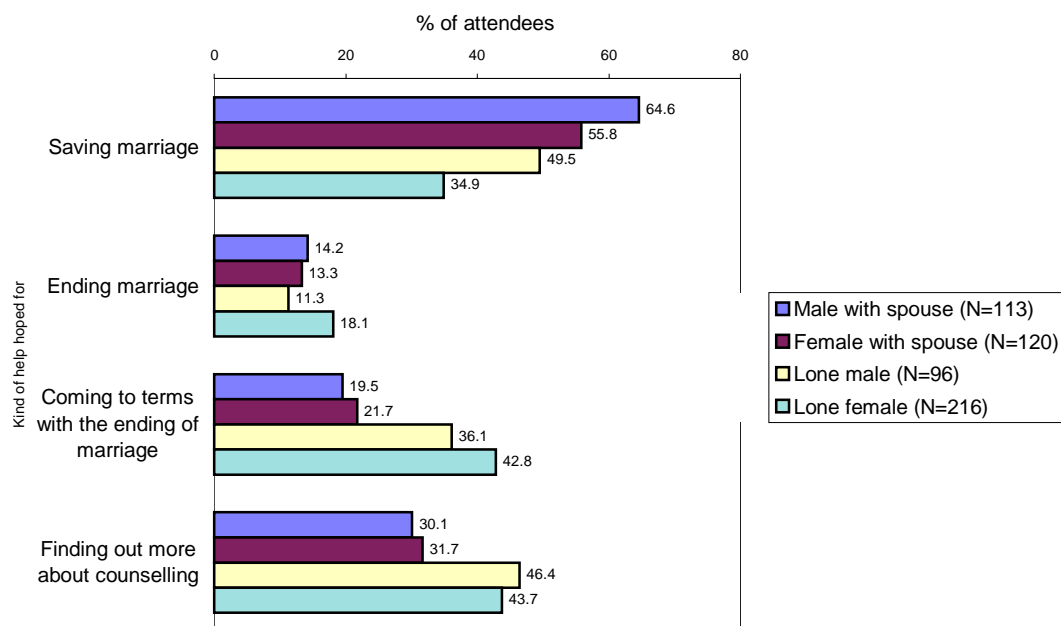


Figure 3.2 Attendees' reasons for going to a meeting with a marriage counsellor by gender and type of attendee

People who attended with a partner were more likely than those who attended alone to want to save the marriage. Others went to the MWMC with a variety of agendas: to solve their problems; to try to gain peace of mind; to get help in making decisions about how to proceed; to get help with talking to children; or to avoid future marriages ending in divorce.

The majority of people were positive about the MWMC, believing that it had helped them to move on and clarify the next steps:

It has really helped me to communicate. I give my marriage [a] fifty-fifty chance of surviving now – instead of no chance before. (F)

It was absolutely one hundred per cent perfect. I made an appointment with a solicitor two days later so we can start legal proceedings. (M)

Taking Up Counselling

Just under half of those who went to a MWMC made an appointment for counselling afterwards. Of those who did go to counselling, 72 per cent indicated that it had helped them to gain a better understanding of their relationship, but only 19 per cent said that it had helped them to save their relationship. The following are typical of the views expressed by attendees:

The marriage counselling session was useful. It enabled me to say things to my ex-husband in a safe environment where he had to listen – which he would not have done on his own. We would not have gone for any counselling without this session [the MWMC]. (F)

It helped me to focus on our problems, and to vent what I was feeling about my wife's affair. I have been up and down like a yo-yo. I have been to counselling on my own since then. (M)

Having been married to the same person for eighteen years you think you know someone, but after counselling it helped me and my husband to see things from a different angle, which helped me to understand what was going wrong. I would not say everything is back to normal, but I try to understand what is happening if things start to slide, and we are trying to arrange more time together to work things out and to see each other's point of view. Therefore, I feel that our marriage definitely benefited from the help we received ... (F)

I found both the information meeting and the introductory meeting with a marriage counsellor extremely helpful. Although my husband and I had already separated, I felt at a loss as to how to deal with the situation I had found myself in, and I needed someone to point me in the right direction. I then went on to have several sessions with an excellent counsellor who really set me on the road to recovery. (F)

Measuring Outcomes

Clulow has suggested that there is

something imaginatively self-contradicting in a system that offers marriage counselling to those seeking divorce. While seen as a perverse and obstructive move by some, it has the potential for accommodating the ambivalence and contradictory feelings that so often surround the ending of marriage for one if not both partners. It may also help those who are unsure about what they want.²

As Figure 3.3 shows, 19 per cent of those who attended counselling after going to a MWMC indicated that it had helped them to save their marriage. It is clear that counselling helps some people to save their marriage and others to end their marriage and/or come to terms with the fact that their marriage is over. It can also help people develop an understanding of themselves, their partners and their relationship, and can help to minimise the impact of divorce on children. The multi-purpose approach of relationship counselling makes it difficult to evaluate effectiveness on a single measure such as saving marriages. There was no evidence to suggest that those who went to counselling had a better-quality relationship with their spouse than those who had no counselling contact beyond the MWMC, irrespective of whether they went to counselling alone or with their spouse.

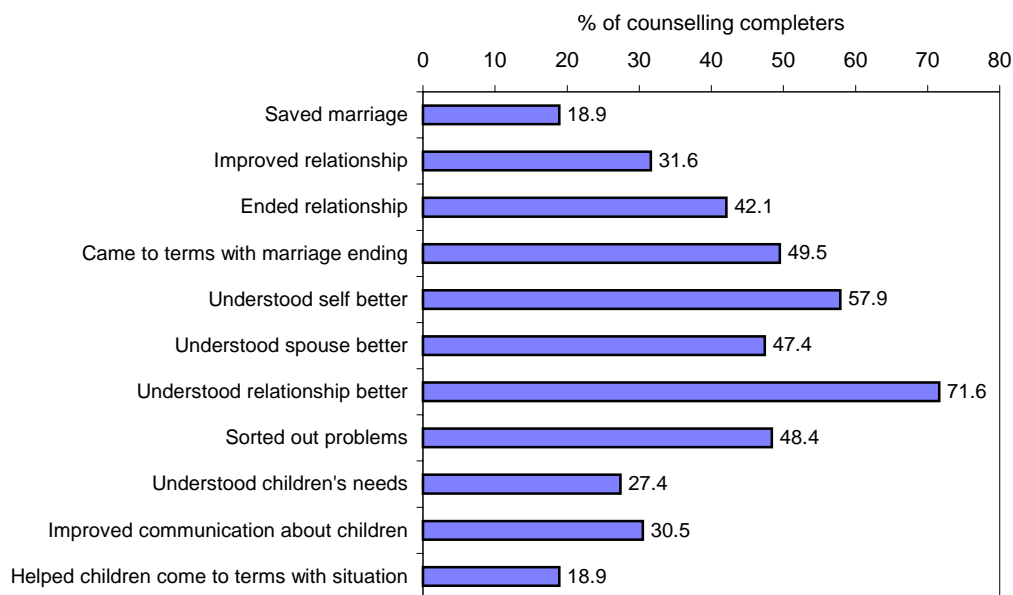


Figure 3.3 Counselling outcomes (N = 95)

The MWMC seemed to be particularly helpful for those who were uncertain about their marriage and attended an information meeting not knowing where to turn, and for those who were certain either that they wanted to save their marriage or that they did not want their marriage to end. Some attendees felt that the one-off intervention of this meeting was enough to help them to work on their marriage without the need for further counselling. Others saw the meeting as a gateway to the counselling process as it dispelled preconceived ideas about counselling and enabled them to view it as a positive intervention in helping to restore their marriage. As a result of the improved communication they had

² Clulow, C., 'Supporting marriage in the theatre of divorce', in the Rt Hon. Lord Justice Thorpe and E. Clarke (eds), *No Fault or Flaw: The Future of the Family Law Act 1996*, Family Law (2000), p. 23.

gained through having attended a MWMC, some people were able to work through difficulties with their spouse and, in so doing, were able to slow down the decision-making process and reflect on whether they could in fact save their marriage.

Devising and Delivering the MWMC

Six agencies participated in the delivery of the MWMC: the African-Caribbean Family Mediation Service, the Asian Family Counselling Service, the Jewish Marriage Council, London Marriage Guidance Council, Marriage Care and Relate. They greatly appreciated the opportunity it provided for inter-agency co-operation. Counsellors and their supervisors were extremely positive about the new service. In their view the MWMC offered attendees the opportunity to be heard (telling one's story is an important activity and one which the information meeting discouraged), and to talk about the ending of the marriage. It also provided an alternative, and perhaps more accessible, route into counselling, legitimising the need to contact a counselling agency. For some, it signalled the last chance to try to save the marriage; others were motivated by the safety and privacy of the meeting.

The solution-focused approach enabled constructive work to be done in a relatively short meeting, but was more useful if both partners attended together. There was support from all the agencies for the MWMC to continue as an option for people facing marriage breakdown, but one which should not necessarily be tied to the divorce process.

The analysis of costs, which is the subject of a separate report,³ suggests that the unit cost of providing an individual with a MWMC would be between £39 and £70. There is scope for reducing this considerably in a national system with a much higher throughput. These costs would only be incurred by the state, however, with respect to those attendees who are entitled to public funding through the Legal Services Commission. Other attendees would, presumably, have to pay for the meeting themselves. There is no way of knowing how many would attend a MWMC under those circumstances.

The Provision of Information and the Prevention of Marriage Breakdown

The particular lady [a counsellor] that we saw was very good. She made it clear from the start that she was there to help, not necessarily to get us back together. She was there to get us through the muddle. It wasn't a sort of cure-all type of thing. She was just there to help, whatever the conclusion was, which took the pressure off my husband. I think he found it helpful as it made him not resent going. (F)

The research has highlighted confusions surrounding the terms marriage saving, marriage support and marriage counselling. They are clearly not the same thing. The trend towards broadening the remit of marriage counselling from marriage saving to personal problem solving has served to confuse the issue of why people who define themselves as having a marital problem should go to counselling. The saving marriage agenda requires a focus on the 'we', although many spouses are concerned primarily, for a host of complex reasons, with a project of (re)development, (re)assessment and defence of the 'me'. Such concerns were evident among people who attended a MWMC. Less than half went to the meeting hoping to save their marriage, while 15 per cent wanted help in ending their marriage and almost a third wanted help to come to terms with the fact that their marriage was over.

Marriage counselling is marketed and used as a means of ending relationships as well as of saving them. Nevertheless, the Lord Chancellor made it clear during parliamentary debate that the function of

³ Dolton, P. and Horan, N., *An Analysis of the Cost of Information Meetings* (2000).

marriage counselling, so far as the FLA is concerned, is specifically related to marriage saving.⁴ The term ‘marriage saving’ is in itself problematic. Is a marriage saved simply because couples decide not to divorce and/or continue living in the same household, or is the quality of the relationship important? Some attendees were still in their marriage many months after attending an information meeting, but described themselves as unhappy.

Improving Relationships

There may be a case for shifting the emphasis of information provision from marriage saving to one that focuses on improving the quality of the relationship between husbands and wives, irrespective of whether they continue to live together. This would seem also to be a more appropriate agenda for the existing marriage support agencies, and it is particularly important with respect to parents who are contemplating divorce. One of the objectives of the FLA is that people who divorce when they have dependent children should continue to be responsible parents. Responsible parenting demands a considerable degree of parental co-operation. The evidence from our evaluation suggests that counselling can assist people through the process of ending a marriage and coming to terms with divorce. Most of those who used it claimed that it had increased their self-understanding and had helped them develop a better understanding of their relationship. There is a case, it seems, for promoting objectives that go beyond marriage saving. Some of these are consistent with another of the principles underlying the FLA, which is to bring marriages to an end with minimum distress.

If the emphasis is to be on saving marriages, however, one might suggest that the marriage counselling provision that follows on from an information meeting needs to be more narrowly focused on marriage saving than it is at present. For instance, it would be perfectly feasible to restrict the MWMC to people who indicate that they want to save their marriage, or even to spouses who are prepared to attend together. This would mean that those who wanted to engage with personal counselling would be free to do so through the normal channels. It may suggest that different approaches to counselling will be required.

We have attempted to establish whether the MWMC serves a useful function as a kind of halfway house between an information meeting and counselling. Findings suggest that that it could, in fact, replace an information meeting for some people, especially those who had not made up their mind about whether to divorce. Certainly, we would recommend that an attendee at an information meeting who is wanting to save the marriage, or is uncertain about whether it can be saved, should be encouraged to attend a MWMC as quickly as possible before the marital situation deteriorates and/or irreversible decisions are taken.

The Timing of Interventions

We conclude from our evaluation that the fact that attendance at an information meeting in the pilots has led to only a small number of marriages being ‘saved’ might, in our view, be due to information not coming sufficiently early in the separation process. If the information meeting is seen as the first step in the process of getting a divorce, it seems unlikely that it will do much to affect reconciliation. Unless people can be encouraged to access information about marriage support services earlier, when marriages first get into difficulty, the focus on saving marriages in the information meetings will be relevant to relatively few. There is evidence that the information meeting tended to tip those who were

⁴ Lord Irvine of Lairg, Official Report (H.L.), 27 June 1996 at col. 1061.

uncertain about their marriage into divorce mode. This may, of course, be a positive outcome for those who have grappled with uncertainty and indecision and need the courage to move forward. Stopping to think may well be the necessary prerequisite to taking the next decisive steps, whatever they may be.⁵ If attendees do want to proceed into counselling to save the marriage, however, counselling agencies will need to think about how to avoid the delays which deterred some from going further. Waiting lists were mentioned by many people who wanted counselling but found that the delays meant that their situation deteriorated beyond the point where marital counselling might have helped.

⁵ McCarthy, P., Walker, J. and Hooper, D., 'Saving marriage: a role for divorce law?', *Family Law*, vol. 30 (June 2000), pp. 412–16.