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ABSTRACT

Many couples who come in for family counseling report that financial difficulty is a factor contributing to their current struggles. Yet few therapists spend much time, or even feel qualified to help couples in this critical area. The purpose of this study was to interview subjects who were married or who are married to discern their financial management skills, and the impact it had on their marriages. Married people (N=11) were interviewed; they ranged in age from 25 to 56, and had been married for 4 months to 27 years. Twelve open-ended questions were asked. The questions centered on couples' financial values, money management techniques, spending categories, percentages of total available income spent in each category, and couples' hindsight concerning their own spending habits. Subjects indicated stressors ranging from less time together, increased fatigue and anxiety, bickering and fighting over money spent, discussions of divorce and an expressed desire for less debt. All of the couples interviewed cited the availability of credit as a curse rather than a blessing. Of those respondents who had experienced a divorce, 60% said that finances was either a major cause or a major factor. Therapists must remember to inquire about a family's financial system; therapists cannot afford to accept surface answers if they truly want to help the family create a healthier system. (ABL)

The Impact of Financial Stress in Marriage: Implications for Marriage and Family Therapists

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Running Head: Financial Stress

THE IMPACT OF FINANCIAL STRESS IN MARRIAGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPISTS

By Sandra Crews Arguello*

ABSTRACT

Financial difficulty is a common, yet often unrecognized stressor for couples who seek family counseling. Few therapists are trained to assess the nature and cause of financial difficulties, nor are they prepared to help clients through counseling or referrals. Counselors are encouraged to inquire about, and be prepared to help with, a family's financial system. Resources are also suggested to help clients establish a budget and get out of debt.

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Introduction

Many couples who come in for family counseling report financial difficulty is a factor contributing to their current struggles. Yet few therapists spend much time, or even feel qualified to help couples in this critical area (Myhre & Sporakowski, 1986). Marriage and family therapists need to be able to assess the nature and cause of the financial difficulties, as well as be prepared to help clients through counseling or referrals.

Related Literature

There is little current published literature concerning family financial difficulties and the role of the therapist in helping. Yet the dynamics of family finances are well documented. Three basic premises have been outlined in the literature. Clearly, some families do not function well in economic management, which causes conflict (Myhre & Sporakowski, 1986). The precipitating factors might include lack of functional competence, external economic forces and events, and/or personal psychopathology (Bagarozzi & Bagarozzi, 1980; Burkett, 1986, 1989; Caplovitz, 1979; DiGiulio & Janosik, 1982; Myhre & Sporakowski, 1986). The cited articles clearly outline each of these premises and can be referred to for specific information.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to interview subjects who were married or who are married to discern their financial management skills, and the impact it had on their marriages. The implications for this study focus on those couples whose financial difficulties are the result of a lack of training and understanding in how to use credit, and who as a result had acquired more debt than they could functionally afford.

Procedure

For this study, eleven married people were interviewed; they ranged in age from 25 through 56, and had been married from four months to 27 years. The questions were asked verbally and answers were notated by the interviewer. Twelve open-ended questions were asked. The questions centered on couples' financial values, money management techniques, spending categories, percentages of total available income spent in each category, and couples' hindsight opinions concerning their own spending habits.

Of the eleven respondents, two had been previously married twice, and were currently married. Two had been previously married once and were currently married. One man had been married twice, but is currently divorced. Two couples were married to their original spouses. Two spouses were married for the first time, although both were married to men who had been previously divorced.

Results

Some of the most interesting findings from the interviews could be summarized with the concept that hindsight is 20-20. Indeed, it was a rare couple whose interview indicated financial stress who could also verbalize that it might be having an impact on their marriage in a succinct, concise sentence. Their interviews, however, would indicate stressors ranging from less time together, increased fatigue and anxiety, bickering and fighting over money spent, discussions of divorce, and an expressed desire for less debt. Those who could verbalize the impact had received some training in personal financial management.

One hundred percent of the couples interviewed cited the availability of credit as a curse rather than a blessing, and when asked, "If you could return to a more simple lifestyle with the payoff being more time with your spouse would you do it?" again 100% of the respondents answered yes. Also interesting, 60% of those respondents who had experienced a divorce said that finances was either the major cause or a major factor. These findings from a limited sample are consistent with the cited national averages (Burkett, 1989).

Significantly, eight out of eleven of those interviewed had worked a second job either to relieve financial stress, to "get ahead" or quite literally, make payments which otherwise could not have been made without additional income. Thus, in our credit oriented society, many couples were able to obtain credit which they could not afford.

A stressor in one marriage may not prove to be a stressor in another. The overuse of credit, for some, is part of a game where the players have no intentions of ever paying the debts. For most, however, paying the debts or at least keeping up with the minimum payments is important. Yet in the 1980's and 1990's, the bankruptcy rate has skyrocketed (Burkett, 1986, 1989). Bankruptcy is also a significant stressor, with a large percentage of those filing bankruptcy ultimately filing for divorce (Burkett, 1989). In this study, two of the respondents had filed for and been granted bankruptcy. Both are divorced from the spouses with whom they filed. One couple is currently in the process of filing at the time of this study.

One young couple, although heavily in debt, did not feel finances or the extra jobs being worked were stressors. They felt their schedules would conflict even without extra jobs. This young couple has placed much of their spendable income into brand new, expensive vehicles; yet each works a second job and they live in a small apartment to compensate for the high car payments. The wife said if she could do it over again she would "not have bought such an expensive truck, put more money in the bank, and buy everything with cash instead of credit." Yet their newest car lease was signed just four weeks before the interview.

In the case of this couple, they may be heading for great financial stress, yet they cannot see it. A therapist's intervention could possibly help them see the bigger picture. When spouses work extra long hours, it is difficult for the brief time spent together to be of great quality. Generally, as people become increasingly more tired their tolerance, patience, communication skills, and interest in outside activities diminishes. These are not solid building blocks for a marriage.

Discussion

Since the end of World War II, the economy of the United States has continued to become more and more oriented towards the free use of credit as a way for families to acquire material items which they could not otherwise afford to purchase on a cash only basis. With each decade since the 1940's, the percentage of acquired personal debt which has been allowed and considered acceptable has continued to rise. In this time span of fifty years, an entire generation of spenders has been reared with the availability of credit, without teaching and training in how to manage finances. Indeed, a majority of young adults do not know the difference between simple and compound interest, or even how to properly balance a checkbook (Burkett, 1985; Myhre & Sporakowski, 1986).

Nearly fifty percent of Americans will get a divorce at some time in their lives. Eighty five percent of men and 75% of women will remarry, and of those people, 61% of men and 54% of women will again divorce (Peck & Manocherian, 1989). Of the original fifty percent who divorce, ninety percent report financial stress was a major contributor or the main cause for the divorce (Burkett, 1989).

Although money is frequently cited as a major area of adjustment for couples, few marriage and family therapists ever delve into the subject of finances with their clients (Carter, 1989; Myhre & Sporakowski, 1986). Perhaps this is in part due to the fact our society in general is not sure how to discuss personal finances. Perhaps it is a reluctance on the part of a therapist to discuss personal financial difficulties while at the same time expecting a fair and equitable enumeration for the counseling services rendered. Perhaps therapists feel the topic is not in their domain, but rather in the domain of a financial specialist. These hypotheses could be formulated into further study.

Yet one area of questioning which needs to be included in the therapist's exploration process is the handling of money, and the personal and family values which accompany it. This cannot be a one question, one answer review when 90% of all couples divorcing for the first time cite finances as a major factor.

Unfortunately, very few therapists have received any training in how to counsel couples concerning financial matters. Those who have received training have only received a mean of eight hours. This most likely explains why few feel qualified to even broach the subject. Yet virtually all would like to receive further training and consider it important (Myhre & Sporakowski, 1986).

As stated earlier and outlined in the cited literature, the reasons people overspend are varied. In the case of most of the respondents interviewed, and of most interest for this study, the lack of money management skills frequently seems to be a primary problem. Many people know how to write checks every month, but few actually live on a budget which has been discussed and agreed upon. In our study three couples have a budget, and one sticks to it. Of the other two, one couple transfers money from one category to another, and one couple keeps track of spending, but does not live on the budget. Five households in our study do not or did not have a budget when married. Significantly, of the three households who do have budgets, all had received specific training in how to create and live by a budget.

Without financial management training, it is almost impossible for couples to survive, let alone thrive financially. In the 1940's and before, many households were managed with an envelope system. Money for each category was placed in an envelope, and when the envelope was empty the family knew they could not spend anymore. A checking account with a budget is run essentially the same way, with categorized spending. Yet without guidance and training most couples will not understand this principle. Indeed, one of the techniques of personal debt counselors is to have their clients close their checking accounts and revert to actual envelopes (Burkett, 1982).

Implications

When clients come into a therapist's office to discuss marital problems, one area of exploration must be their financial wellbeing. There are several excellent resources to help couples establish a budget and get out of debt, thereby eliminating the need for second jobs, long hours, and monthly fights and/or worries about who and what to pay. Several of these resources have been cited in this paper and are listed in the references. A therapist can closely guide a couple through the studies as part o he counseling, refer the clients to others for this one aspect, or ask the clients to do the work on their own with some follow up from the therapist. But the therapist cannot ignore this critical area of concern for so many couples.

Surely, helping clients with money management will not solve all their problems and struggles. But if a family can get its financial household in order, it can be an excellent stepping stone to other areas, while also having eliminated a great source of stress for the couple, as they work on other significantly important issues. We, as therapists, must remember to inquire about a family's financial system, and we cannot afford to accept surface answers if we truly want to help the family create a healthier system.

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