

Marriage therapist says high-conflict couples have work to do before saying 'I do'

February 3 2012, By Sandra Stith

(PhysOrg.com) -- A Kansas State University marriage therapist has Valentine's Day advice for couples contemplating commitments and engagement rings: Mix romance with a generous portion of reality.

The reality is that relationship problems -- drinking, anger, the need to control, hitting -- don't evaporate when [couples](#) become engaged or marry, according to Sandra Stith, who has spent more than 15 years developing effective solution-focused therapy methods for high-conflict couples.

"We know that most people in violent relationships had [warning signs](#) early in the relationship, but they ignored them," said Stith, a professor of marriage and family therapy in the university's School of Family Studies and Human Services.

Her research has found that 50 to 70 percent of couples who seek counseling have experienced some form of violence in their relationship.

"They wouldn't consider their relationships violent," Stith said, "but abuse can be physical, mental, sexual, psychological and/or verbal."

She suggested specific questions to ask before considering marriage:

- * Does he or she have the need to control both you and the relationship?
- * Does he or she anger easily? For example, how does he or she react

when getting cut off by another driver in traffic? "Most problems with [anger](#) focused on other people will eventually be focused on you," she said.

* How does he or she talk to or about parents and family members? Is he or she insulting or hostile to them? The way someone treats his or her parents may provide a glimpse into the way his or her partner will be treated in the future.

* Does he or she seem too aggressive and too quick to resort to violence or [intimidation](#)?

Partners may think things will get better over time, but they probably won't unless help is sought, Stith said.

Drinking is a huge issue in predicting the future of a relationship, she said.

"If there is a problem that exacerbates a drinking or other substance abuse problem, it will grow with the stress of marriage and children. Life gets more stressful, not less," Stith said. "Don't hesitate to say, 'Before we get to marriage, you need to address your substance abuse problems. If you can't cut back, we can't be together.'"

Stith had other suggestions for high-conflict couples who want to establish long-term relationships:

* Don't rush into marriage. Spend time getting to know each other.

* Participate in premarital counseling or other form of relationship counseling before finalizing wedding plans. It's difficult to call off a wedding after the date is set and the dress is purchased.

* Learn how to address conflict without allowing it to escalate to name calling or violence.

* Learn to call timeout before a discussion gets heated. "Negotiate this ahead of time," Stith said. Plan a calming activity like watching television. Working out with a punching bag and driving away are both bad ideas during a timeout.

* If a partner recognizes that a relationship is becoming destructive, he or she should seek help early.

"I'm optimistic. I've seen people who had ugliness in the [marriage](#) for 30 years, and they learned how to have conflicts that weren't blaming or insulting. It's never too late or too early," Stith said.

Provided by Kansas State University

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