

Interview with Dr. Sandra Ceren, author of *Essentials of Premarital Counseling: Creating Compatible Couples*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview Dr. Sandra Ceren about her new book "Essentials of Premarital Counseling: Creating Compatible Couples."

Dr. Ceren has a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology and did post-graduate work at the American Institute for Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy in New York City. She holds a Diplomate of the American Board of Psychology and is a Fellow of the Academy of Family Psychology. Dr. Ceren is the author of the thriller novels "Prescription for Terror" and "Secrets from the Couch" and many mental health articles. Today, she is here to talk about her newest book "Essentials of Premarital Counseling: Creating Compatible Couples."

Tyler: Welcome, Dr. Ceren. I'm glad you could join me today. To begin, would you tell us why you felt a need to write a book about premarital counseling?

Dr. Ceren: My work with married couples in conflict or at the brink of divorce led me to design a program to help couples considering marriage learn if they were suited for marriage and for each other. After a five year follow-up survey in which fifty-six of the seventy couples utilizing the program rated the materials and counseling experience of great benefit, it was time to share the program with colleagues.

Tyler: Is premarital counseling becoming more common today? I know many churches require it but do you see many couples with secular backgrounds embracing it?

Dr. Ceren: Premarital counseling is popular with clergy. Healthy marriages should produce a healthy flock. Many clergy do an excellent job for their members. They cover some of the same topics as my program. Clergy help couples address important issues that may be overlooked without counseling. However, they do not provide in-depth work on an individual, more personal level. Some couples who have had pre marital counseling in religious settings have indicated that it was too general for them. Other couples who do not practice a religion prefer to have counseling from a secular professional. Others prefer more psychologically oriented approach with a professional experienced in matters that they may not feel comfortable discussing with clergy.

Tyler: I understand "Essentials of Premarital Counseling" is really a manual for therapists. How do therapists use the book, and can it also be used by premarital couples on their own?

Dr. Ceren: Thank you for asking this question. "Essentials" is directed to professionals to help them learn the skill of pre-marital work and it will be soon be followed by "Look Before You Leap, a Premarital Guide." That book is written specifically for couples and contains the same quizzes.

Tyler: Is your book focused on a group or an individual couple approach? Do you recommend couples be part of both group and individual couple counseling?

Dr. Ceren: "Essentials of Premarital Counseling" does not suggest a group approach. The program is highly personalized for couples who may be seen a few times individually.

Tyler: The book covers a ten-week step process. Why ten weeks? Can you tell us a little about the timeline or organization of the process?

Dr. Ceren: Ideally the program is ten weeks; however, it can be extended to twelve weeks or more if needed. The reason for not making it shorter is that it is important for couples to know each other for a period of time and to experience each other in a variety of situations in order to have a clearer picture of each other.

Tyler: What are some of those situations that couples need to experience each other in for which you provide counseling?

Dr. Ceren: Situations that may provoke a conflict such as attitude toward finances (spending and saving money), relationships with each others family and friends, personal habits, lifestyle changes, job or career changes, relocation, competition, how much time each partner prefers to spend alone and together, allocation of household chores and assorted everyday problems.

Tyler: Will you share with us one of the valuable exercises in "Essentials of Premarital Counseling?"

Dr. Ceren: Conflict situations are given in which each partner says how s/he would handle it. They then discuss their reactions to their partner's response to see if they can create compromise.

Tyler: Dr. Ceren, what do you think makes "Essentials of Premarital Counseling" stand out from other books on premarital counseling?

Dr. Ceren: The book is based on many decades of work with troubled couples. I have learned why some marriages work well and others do not. This helped me design materials to detect problems and how to fix them if they can be fixed. Several years ago, fifty-six out of seventy couples ranging in age from mid-twenties to mid-forties who had participated in the premarital counseling sessions and used the materials returned a five-year post counseling survey. That the majority turned in the survey is beyond expectation. Forty couples decided to marry each other. Thirty-three in this group remain in satisfactory marriages (82.5% success rate). They gave excellent ratings to the counseling experience and materials. Of the seven remaining couples, two divorced and five are in unstable marriages. They regretted not heeding the warning signs.

There were seven replies to the follow-up survey sent to thirty-two individuals comprising sixteen couples who decided not to marry each other. The seven respondents stated they valued the program and the materials and used what they had learned to select more appropriate mates.

Tyler: What do you feel is the biggest issue premarital couples need to learn and work on to make sure they are and remain compatible?

Dr. Ceren: A willingness to accommodate when it doesn't involve compromising personal values.

Tyler: Would you give us an example?

Dr. Ceren: Learning the art of gracious compromise can thwart arguments and lead to mutual satisfaction.

A willingness to make gracious compromises demonstrates each individual's contribution to the betterment of an intimate relationship. However, when one grudgingly makes compromises, it takes away from the potential of the relationship. This doesn't mean you should do something that upsets you just to get along with your partner. It simply means you are willing to agree to do something that is not your first choice.

For example, let's say it is Friday evening and you've agreed to dine out. You're feeling tired after an exhausting work week and you'd prefer to dine at a local Chinese restaurant, but your mate doesn't particularly enjoy that cuisine. He urges you to try a new bistro an hour away. You try to explain that you are tired, but your mate convinces you he will drive and you can rest during the trip. Somewhat reluctantly, you agree, but when you arrive at the new venue, it is very crowded and there is a long wait for a table. You are tired and hungry and feel justified in your anger and you punish him by refusing to talk to him.

Yours was not a gracious compromise. You had a choice and you agreed to go along with him. Perhaps assertiveness is not your strong suit, but you can learn the technique of self-assertion when you realize you deserve to discuss your preferences.

To punish your partner by your silence compounds the bad feelings you both had over your respective decisions. A better compromise would have been to stick to your point that you were tired and wanted to stay closer to home and to ask him to pick a place he would find acceptable nearby—not necessarily the Chinese restaurant. You could have also recommended that you go to the bistro of his choice over the weekend after you were rested.

Tyler: Do you often see premarital couples go through the counseling only to determine they are not compatible?

Dr. Ceren: Yes. Some start out because of uncertainty.

Tyler: Will you tell us what about being a premarital counselor interests you personally?

Dr. Ceren: For me it is damage control. I want to help prevent the problems that often occur when a poor marriage erodes an emotionally satisfying family life.

Tyler: Dr. Ceren, I mentioned above that you are also a novelist. Would you like to tell us a little about your novels and how your work in psychology has influenced your writing of fiction?

Dr. Ceren: My first novel, a mystery thriller "Prescription for Terror" introduces the protagonist, Dr. Cory Cohen, a psychologist, abandoned by her Japanese mother and raised by her Jewish grandparents. Cory uses her psychological acumen in her pursuit of a serial rapist/killer.

"Secrets from the Couch" is the second novel in the series. Cory's patient vanishes immediately after leaving her session after providing Cory with an important clue that can cost Cory her career and threatens her patient's life.

Tyler: I'm sure people ask if Dr. Cory Cohen is in anyway autobiographical. Do you draw on your experiences in depicting her?

Dr. Ceren: Absolutely. The first book duplicates my personal experience as a rape survivor, among other details.

Tyler: Dr. Ceren, what final advice would you like to give to couples about to embark on the journey of married life?

Dr. Ceren: Hopefully, you're among the fortunate to have connected with your mate on a deep emotional level and you are ready to commit to shared values and a life-long companionship, to be there for each other through joy and sadness. You agree to accept each other's imperfections, and to work out any difficulties that occur between you now and in years to come. By now, you have developed skills to help you in this process, and if not, you are open to learning. You understand that you won't always be able to meet each other's immediate needs and that you must be self-reliant, yet confident that your partner will offer emotional support when necessary.

Tyler: Thank you, Dr. Ceren, for joining me today. Before we go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information we can find there about "Essentials of Premarital Counseling"?

Dr. Ceren: Thank you for reminding me. The two non fiction books will be described as soon as my website is improved. In mid-August, please be sure to visit me at www.DrSandraLevyCeren.com.

Tyler: Thank you, Dr. Ceren, for the informative interview. I hope many couples and therapists benefit from "Essentials of Premarital Counseling: Creating Compatible Couples."