



The Rationale and Effectiveness of

Marriage Intensives

The marriage counseling field has gone through significant changes in the past 25 years. When I, Sharon, entered this line of work in the mid-90s, it was abuzz with change. Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) and other models were challenging the field to shift away from modifying behaviors and teaching communication skills to instead focus on the emotional bond that connects partners to one another. This philosophical shift trickled over into the counseling room where clearly outlined models, such as EFT, focused on helping couples foster a more secure and loving attachment bond.

The winds of change are blowing again in the marriage counseling field, bringing with them not a new therapeutic model, but a fresh way to structure couples therapy called the intensive model. The marriage intensive model is emerging as a highly-effective and impactful way of working with couples to bring about significant and lasting change. In the late 1990s, after training in EFT, I eagerly entered the marriage counseling field and quickly discovered my passion for the intensive model structure. After years of trial and error (I have conducted more than 700 intensives with individual couples, and many more in the group setting), I carved out the Safe Haven Marriage Intensive Model.

In my experience of conducting weekly counseling sessions, I experienced frustrations, for both myself and my clients, because I knew what I could do if couples were able to stay another two hours or two days. The nine steps of EFT clearly outlined the process for walking couples from distress and disconnection to healing and emotional connection. I was hopeful to walk couples through all the steps in one swoop over a few consecutive days. However, I discovered that sitting with couples for more extended periods allowed the conversations to unfold and emotions to be accessed and processed without the feared words, *“Well, that is all the time we have; we will have to pick this up next week.”* Greater therapeutic opportunities opened up when I knew I was not restricted by the clock.

This extended time enabled me to guide couples to get to the heart of their issues, make significant shifts, and find solutions. Then, weekly, follow-up sessions for about two months helped solidify changes and create a new way of interacting that led to solutions that fit into couples’ real-life circumstances.

What is the Marriage Intensive?

In a marriage intensive, couples come for counseling over an extended period. The traditional, one-hour-per-week sessions are expanded to several days. The therapy can be with one or two counselors and one couple or conducted in a group of three to five couples. For this article, we will focus on the private marriage intensive with one counselor and one couple.

A marriage intensive is a way for couples to get to the heart of their distress and begin a journey of healing and connection, all in a few days. Whether it is healing from years of slow disconnection, accumulation of hurts or deep wounds as a result of betrayal, couples are guided as they dig deep to recover and love each other well.

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One husband summarized it this way, “*The stereotype is that real men don’t usually sit on a couch this long talking about feelings, but I really do want to understand myself, heal my marriage, and know how to love my wife. And the intensive was the way to do it... the best way possible.*”

Why Couples Choose an Intensive

At the Safe Haven Relationship Center, we have identified a few, significant reasons why couples seek a marriage intensive as opposed to weekly marriage counseling.

- **Couple “stuckness.”** There are times when both the counselor and the couple get stuck and cannot make the necessary breakthroughs. Couples are then left disappointed in the lack of progress after several months of counseling.
- **Revolving door of counselors.** Having gone through numerous marriage counselors with little success, the thought of starting over with yet another is disheartening.
- **Couples are highly motivated.** Couples want more from their marriages. They do not want to continue living hurt and disconnected and are motivated to make their unions work. Many couples come to our intensives as a last-ditch effort, often not sure if they should stay or leave their marriages. The intensive can be a powerful experience, as couples are able to either achieve healing in their relationships or make sense of why they are separating.



Why is the Marriage Intensive Structure Effective for Counselors?

The intensive model sets a different framework for not only couples, but also counselors. The extended time allows counselors to follow their therapeutic structure, keep momentum, and not lose traction in the counseling process.

As any counselor knows, working through the healing steps to help couples emotionally connect is difficult. This is

especially true when couples begin each counseling session revisiting the argument of the week. I am sure other therapists have heard debates like: *“Please tell him how wrong he was for not calling to tell me he would be late; I thought you told him in our last session he needs to call me.”* As a result, counselors, often spend the first half of a session being an understanding witness to disagreements... and after calming tempers, containing hurts, and refocusing to get back to the marital model steps, half or more of the allotted time has been consumed.

At one time or another, counselors get stuck in their work with couples. However, referring couples to a marriage intensive provides them with a new marriage-shifting experience where they can then return to their therapists for meaningful follow-up sessions. This innovative concept creates a win-win for both couples and counselors.

Additionally, many couples live in areas where there are few marriage counselors and resources available. The intensive model offers a solution that allows couples to experience effective marriage counseling through the investment of a few days of concentrated, focused attention.

Keep in Mind

There are times when an intensive may not be the best option for couples. Each spouse needs to be assessed for readiness, attend willingly, and not be involved in any current abuse, affairs or addictions. It is best if disclosures are made before the intensive; and if they arise during therapy, the goals will need to shift.

Know your therapeutic marital model well, as well as the model in the intensive format. Many counselors believe the intensive model is just extending the counseling session length. Although longer sittings are productive, counselors have to know what to do with the extended time to maximize its productiveness. As therapists, it is crucial to understand what you want to accomplish during the intensive, what experience you want couples to have, and what it will take to bring about change. It is essential that you are clear on what to do each hour of the intensive. By understanding the model you work from well and re-learning it with the intensive format in mind, you will be able to move through the therapeutic process over a few days. During treatment where therapists are required to work with couples hour after hour, it is not possible to go home, clear your mind, get supervision, and return with a new plan for the next session the following week. It is imperative to know where you are going and what interventions will get you there.

One critique of the marriage intensive is that profound change cannot happen over just a few days. In our clinical work and follow-up sessions with more than 700 couples, we have experienced that through the intensive format it is possible to make the same lasting transformation as seen in weekly therapy, and often more effectively. Follow-up sessions are always meaningful and solidify changes as couples work to make them real in their daily lives. Some couples need the space between weekly meetings to process, re-group, allow their hearts to shift or practice what they have learned.

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When couples venture to attend an intensive and spend an extended time on the counselor's couch, it is a courageous journey. They arrive with many anticipatory fears, just as they do with weekly counseling sessions: *What will we talk about for the next several days? Will we run out of things to say? Will they gang up on me? This is our last-ditch effort... what if it doesn't work?* Also, couples arrive with some unrealistic expectations: *I brought my husband, now change him* or *I came so you can tell my wife how wrong she is.* However, once in the intensive, couples are surprised at how quickly the days go by, the ease of the process, and how satisfying it is to "get to the heart of it all" and go through the deep work necessary to grow as a person and love well.

As a counselor, it is essential to be aware that you are part of what God is doing in the lives and marriages of the couples in your presence. You are on holy ground. It will, therefore, serve you well to obtain the best training possible and know your model and the progressive process of an intensive. It is also recommended that you and your spouse attend a marriage intensive as participants, as the best way to learn is to experience it firsthand. ✦



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ALAN HART, M.S., conducts *Safe Haven Marriage, Family, and Individual Intensives* and is part of fostering healthy communities where people can grow and live well.

Reclaim Freedom



Selah House

Since 2006, Selah House has cared for women and families in our Christ-centered program using clinically advanced strategies. Our clinically diverse, licensed experienced treatment team lets love lead when caring for our clients.

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.
John 15: 12

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please call 765-205-5673.*

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