

The Who, What, and Why about Marriage Conferences

Family Life Canada



Why go to a marriage conference? **Who** attends these events? **What's** the purpose? A couple of years ago I was talking with some friends about attending a marriage conference. During our 'girl-friend' conversation they shared their husbands' comments about these types of events. One husband had joked: "Why go to a conference and wreck the good thing that we got going?" Another stated that a good marriage is really just exercising **common sense**. His point was that everyone knows how they should treat their spouse, they just need to do it!

Over my years of being involved in various marriage events, I find that there are all types of responses surrounding marriage conferences. People's attitudes fall on a continuum between "only people with marriages in serious trouble go to a marriage conference" and "Only people in good marriages are willing to show up at one!"



Who are the people that attend marriage conferences? According to research both 'distressed' and 'non distressed' people attend marriage conferences (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). In this research they found that 19% of couples in their survey had attended some type of a marriage workshop or retreat within the first five years of their marriage. But for most, participating in a marriage retreat is not the norm.

I am sure you've heard stats about divorce, and therefore less people are getting married today than at any other time in our history. Doss et al. (2009) site figures and their research shows that not many people are looking for marital counsel. Less than 37% of divorcing couples report seeking any type of marital help; not from books, therapy or workshops/conferences.

This spring FamilyLife Canada is hosting a marriage conference in Victoria, Niagara Falls, and Banff called "A Weekend Getaway". What type of people do you think will be there?

Typically Weekend Getaways are attended by every age group and they are people in every stage of marriage. There will be couples who are engaged and using this weekend as a marriage preparation course. Some attendees will be in their first year of marriage. These can be tumultuous times, but as I have noticed throughout years of observation, around the seven-year mark is definitely a time when some good marriage input can be of value. Then there will be the veteran marriages; those who have been married for almost 2/3 of their lives or more! And there will be many on their second marriage. Every stage of marriage is usually represented. And the reasons why they attend are as diverse as the marriages themselves.



What's the purpose of attending a marriage conference? Past events and personal interviews from attendees reveal that some couples come intermittently using this event as a 'tune-up' to their marriage. There are also stories that some couples had attended as a last-ditch-effort to save their marriage. Some couples have been sent by their parents. Others were recommended to attend by a counselor or pastor. Some just wanted a weekend away with their spouse and without the kids! Recently I heard a

father-of-the-bride admonish his new son-in-law to make sure they attend a marriage conference around the one year mark as it takes about a year for some issues to surface. Good advice.

The most obvious reason to attend a marriage conference seems to be common sense.

I agree with my friend's husband that common sense is needed to build a good marriage, **but a good marriage also takes effort, attention and intention. Good marriages rarely just 'happen'. It is true that often we know what to do, we just need some encouragement to do it. Any marriage, at any stage, and for any reason could use some sustenance.** Spending time together allows time to consider the relationship and perhaps rediscover each other. It provides topics for conversation and allows interaction at deeper levels. It can also just be fun to spend a weekend with your spouse without any interruptions. **Common sense would suggest that spending time at a marriage conference would be beneficial on many levels.**

Common sense is also heartily promoted at Weekend Getaway conferences. By definition common sense is 'good sense and good judgment in practical matters'. There is time to talk about what makes a good marriage, and there are certain philosophies and attitudes that accompany a good marriage. But a good marriage conference addresses issues of marriage in practical ways, and the Weekend Getaway is full of good practical ideas and suggestions.

- **Relevant** marriage topics
- Ample time for **discussion** and **connection**
- Time to **rest** and **relax** together
- Great **workbooks**
- Speakers are **authentic** with their stories

And just the fact that a couple is willing to spend a weekend in hopes of encouraging their marriage is a practical help in itself.

Whatever the who, what or why that surrounds a marriage conference, perhaps the best thing to consider is this: **attending a marriage conference can show your spouse that you are committed to making your marriage a priority. At any stage, age or whatever your reasons for attending a conference, it just seems like good common sense.**

Doss, B. D., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2009). Marital therapy, retreats, and books: The who, what, when, and why of relationship help-seeking. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 35(1), 18-29.

