



Defining: DISCERNMENT COUNSELING

Written By Amy Morgan

Dr. Harris has served as Professor and Director of the Couple and Family Therapy Program in the Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota since 2009. Prior to joining the University of Minnesota, Dr. Harris was on faculty at Texas Tech University for 13 years. In Texas, he chaired the Research Advisory Group for the Texas Healthy Marriage Initiative and was recognized for Outstanding Service from the Texas Health and Human Service Commission in 2008. Dr. Harris also is the Associate Director of the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project, whose mission is to prevent unnecessary divorce and premature divorce decisions.

Family social scientist Steven M. Harris, Ph.D. LMFT, has invested a great deal of his 30-year career researching the emotional and social aspects of divorce. As a therapist, he found the experience of working with distressed couples when one partner was mentally and emotionally unmotivated frustrating. It became Dr. Harris' professional mission to develop a more productive model through which therapists could guide their clients. This experience led he and Dr. William J. Doherty to develop the Discernment Counseling protocol.

This new counseling method has proven more effective than traditional couples therapy to help married partners obtain clarity about whether pursuing divorce is the best option to solve their marital difficulties. Drs. Harris and Doherty released the first textbook on this modality, Discernment Counseling, in April 2017.

The Discernment Counseling model they developed provides a practical and reproducible roadmap to help couples reach a clear and confident decision about whether they should move forward with divorce or decide to work toward reconciliation.

“Traditional Couples Therapy often is not effective for those considering divorce, as it is designed to help couples connect and bond,” Dr. Harris said. “We realized we needed a new model. Even if they do divorce, each party is able to make that self declaration with more calmness, less argument, a greater understanding about why,” he added. “There is a visible resignation; they are more at peace. This provides a better prognosis for co-parenting.”

Discernment Counseling is designed to be a short-term process, typically involving fewer than five sessions to help clients make a decision regarding the future of their relationship. It is particularly helpful for “mixed agenda” couples where one partner is leaning out of the marriage and the other wants to save it. This is a frustrating and challenging situation for therapists, lawyers, mediators—and most of all, for the couples themselves. Discernment Counseling provides couples with a venue to be more open and honest about their resentments and concerns while also finding the right course of action.