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Unhappy couples can go for discernment counselling – it's free

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She had been unhappy in her marriage for some time, and the straw that broke the camel's back was discovering her husband's affair.

But the mother of two teenage children was in two minds about getting a divorce. So she sought discernment counselling to help her decide whether to stay in the marriage or end it.

Her counsellor, Ms Patricia Lum, who is with the Care Corner Strengthening Families Programme, said the woman in her 40s and her husband had drifted apart over the years as they often argued over matters involving their children.

The husband felt his wife did not respect or appreciate him, and he started to withdraw from her, which led her to feel unloved and unsupported, Ms Lum said.

Both hold professional jobs.

But after three sessions of discernment counselling, they realised to some extent how they had each contributed to their marital woes.

The couple decided to salvage the marriage for their children's sake and went for intensive counselling to help them resolve their marital woes, Ms Lum said.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) introduced discernment counselling recently after getting feedback from counsellors that some divorcing couples were ambivalent about their decisions to divorce.

A spokesman for the ministry told The Straits Times: "The goal is for these couples to gain clarity and confidence in making a decision about the future of their marriage, based on a deeper understanding of what has happened to their marriage and each person's contribution to the issues.

"This can help to prevent an escalation of conflicts in the couple's relationship notwithstanding which decision they make: whether to work on their marriage, postpone their decision to divorce, or to proceed with divorce."

Since the Strengthening Families Programme@Family Service Centres (FAM@FSCs) started operations in October last year, 10 couples have signed up for discernment counselling, the MSF spokesman said.

Discernment counselling is offered free at FAM@FSCs and

the Divorce Support Specialist Agencies.

FAM@FSCs offer specialised services for couples facing marital and divorce woes, as well as families facing various stresses, such as conflicts in parent-child relationships and within the extended family.

There are now five FAM@FSCs, and the number will be extended to 10 such centres by December this year.

Ms Lum pointed out that discernment counselling is not marital counselling, which is intensive counselling aimed at helping couples work through their marital problems.

"Discernment counselling is like the A&E when the marriage is in a crisis and one party wants out while the other wants to stay in the marriage," she said, referring to accident and emergency departments in hospitals.

"The counsellor gives them a better understanding of the options available to them and helps them to process and reflect on their contributions to the marital problems, so that they make a more informed decision."

One feature of discernment counselling, which can extend to five sessions, is that the husband and wife must attend the sessions together.

Getting both parties together helps them to process their issues together and allows them to hear from the other spouse how their actions had contributed to their marital woes, Ms Lum said.

For the cases she has counselled, most chose to either divorce or work on their marriages, Ms Lum said.

She added: "Even if they choose to divorce, discernment counselling brings about better closure and this reduces acrimony. It also helps in their personal healing and growth."

With the launch of the Family Assist portal in late December last year, the MSF says it hopes to reach out to more couples who are unsure about getting a divorce to consider discernment counselling.

The portal, which consolidates information and resources related to marital challenges and divorce, will have more features and content in the second quarter of this year.

Those who require support can find a centre nearest to them at www.msf.gov.sg/dfcs/strengtheningfamilyservice/default.aspx

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