Discernment Counseling: Realities of Modern Couples in Distress
a Training for Community Education

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Discernment Counseling: Realities of Modern Couples in Distress
A Training for Community Education

A Thesis Presented to
the Graduate Faculty of
Minnesota State University Moorhead

By

Maranda Kathryn Jacobsen

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Masters of Science in
Clinical Mental Health Counseling

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Moorhead, Minnesota
Abstract

The presented literature review and training are intended to transform the way we perceive & approach ambivalence in marriages and relationships. The objective is to provide more awareness and advocacy of a more effective counseling modality for meeting the needs/realities of modern couples who are uncertain about their marriage. Throughout this review, it is evident that we can no longer deny, as a community and society, the profound levels of relationship ambivalence, rising long-term marital distress, and significant physical and mental health problems for partners and families. Couples and marriages can benefit from discernment counseling as preliminary data found supports this approach as a promising tool for helping mixed-agenda couples, who have struggled with finding direction and solutions from other clinical practices. Discernment counseling meets the unique needs of both the partner leaning into the relationship and the partner who is experiencing ambivalence. This training program is intended for members of the community who deserve to know that there is a form of treatment that seeks to meet them exactly where they are in their relationship ambivalence.

Keywords: ambivalence, discernment counseling, mixed-agenda, on the brink, and marital distress.
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Introduction

It is challenging for anyone to really know what an emotional whirlwind and all the complex feelings that come with the realization that either yourself or your partner is seriously considering divorce. It is equally important to challenge the societal norms that accompany divorce. Divorce is a highly charged and stigmatized topic in our society. It’s important to transform the way we perceive and approach ambivalence in marriages and relationships.

The current models that are more widely accepted by marriage therapists and community members are a solid method for couples who actively want to work on their marriage. As we know from the research, not every couple fits this category. In fact, around 30 percent of the couples coming into marriage counseling are mixed agenda couples (Doherty, 2015). Traditional marriage counseling is struggling to deal with couples where divorce is on the table for one of them. This is an area of frustration for a lot of marriage counselors.

The purpose of this literature review is to provide awareness and advocacy of a more effective counseling modality for meeting the needs/realities of modern couples who are uncertain about their marriage. The goal of discernment counseling is to ensure clarity about whether or not positive change is possible. Specifically, discernment counseling explores whether or not sufficient commitment and motivation exist for doing the work of couples therapy. In most cases, couples find that there is still enough hope and commitment to try. In some cases, consciously “uncoupling” might be the best path for both people involved. The development of the training emerged from recognizing the data that indicates the prevalence of couples where one partner is leaning towards divorce and the other wants to preserve the relationship and pursue couples therapy. These mixed-agenda couples are common in clinical practice, however, the literature on them is lacking along with awareness of treatment modalities
best suited for them. The overall purpose of the training is to increase community awareness and advocacy for Discernment Counseling services.

**Literature Review: Realities of Modern Couples in Distress**

A significant portion of Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) training focuses on helping couples and families improve their relationships (Seedall, Doherty & Harris, 2017). This may not account for couples with a mixed agenda. Specifically, those couples who may not know whether continuing to work on improving their relationship is the best outcome for themselves and their partner. In most marital counseling, the therapist often puts extra emphasis and focus on the experience of the partner who wants to stay in the relationship. If so, the therapist will design interventions around this to help move the couple towards improvement in their relationship, as the ultimate outcome and overarching goal of therapy (Seedall, Doherty & Harris, 2017). This leads to frustration felt by both the counselors and couples in this process.

According to Doherty (2015), in couples who have already filed for divorce, as many as 40% have a mixed agenda. Furthermore, data from another study found that early on in marriages (within the first year), 60% of couples had serious doubts and reported marital distress, while the other 40% (although they remained married) went on to report emotional disaffection (struggling to stay in love) setting in later in their marriage (Adams, 2007). Therefore, we can no longer deny as a community and society the profound levels of relationship ambivalence, rising long-term marital distress, and significant physical and mental health problems for partners and families.

**What is Discernment Counseling?**
William Doherty has made many contributions to the field of couples and family counseling in the last 30 years. Two of his largest contributions were founding the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project in 2009 and the Citizen Professional Center in 2010 (Doherty & Swartz, 2013). A turning point for the field of couples counseling came when Doherty was approached by a family court judge to address questions about ‘divorce ambivalence’ which was a common theme the judge was seeing from meeting with couples informally about their divorce (Doherty & Swartz, 2013). Upon further research, Doherty and colleagues (2013) discovered surprising levels of ambivalence among divorcing couples who were open to considering services for their marriage. The high interest and need to address divorce ambivalence became evident and as a result, Doherty developed an intervention for these couples that he called “Discernment Counseling” (Doherty & Swartz, 2013).

The preliminary data presented by Doherty, Harris & Wilde (2016) concluded that discernment counseling is a promising tool for helping mixed-agenda couples who have struggled with finding direction and solutions from other clinical practices. The literature indicates that mixed-agenda couples respond differently to therapeutic interventions than couples with the same agenda, and as a result, their risk of divorce is higher (Doherty, Harris & Wilde, 2016). Unlike traditional marriage counseling, discernment counseling focuses only on determining whether the couple could potentially solve their marital problems with further counseling and offers the space to explore their options. (Swartz, 2013).

**Goals and Addressing Mixed agendas**

One person is leaning out of the marriage and nearing a final decision to divorce. The other person is leaning in and ready to do whatever it takes to save the marriage. This poses a challenge for the couples’ therapist. Whose agenda takes priority? According to Doherty, Harris
and Wilde (2016), the goal of discernment counseling is to help guide couples towards feeling greater confidence and clarity regarding the next steps and the direction their relationship will take. This is made possible by gaining a deeper level of understanding of their relationship as well as exploring each person’s contributions to specific relationship problems (Doherty, Harris & Wilde, 2016). Discernment counseling is a brief form of treatment, with the duration being shorter than that of traditional marriage counseling. Furthermore, this type of counseling takes an alternative approach by giving the couples the option to take a series of paths.

The first path involves maintaining the ‘status quo’ of the relationship (keeping things as they currently are). The second path is pursuing separation and/or divorce, and the third path is making a six-month commitment to try couples therapy (Doherty & Harris, 2017). The first pathway involves choosing to stay the course and decide later on. It should also be noted that pathway two is a delicate balance as the counselor’s role is to be respectful of the couples' reasons for divorce while being open to the possibility of restoring the health of their marriage.

In the discernment approach, couples attend both individual sessions by themselves and sessions together as a couple (Doherty, Harris & Wilde, 2016). During the individual conversations, the counselor works to support the couples in understanding their role in the relationship's problems and potential solutions; rather than focusing on changing the other person (Doherty, Harris & Wilde, 2016). The importance is placed on understanding oneself in a marriage, no matter the outcome. The counselor aids the couple in understanding that they cannot divorce themselves. Discernment counseling is unique in that it seeks to address the specific needs of mixed-agenda couples so therapy can become a successful process for them. The need for discernment counseling comes from a demand for alternative standard relationship
improvement strategies with couples where only one partner wants to preserve the relationship (Doherty, Harris & Wilde, 2016).

**Divorce Demographics**

The consequences of divorce are quite problematic and divorce itself is a profoundly stressful life event. Manning, Payne, and Stykes (2017) reported that 50% of married couples file for divorce. This does not necessarily mean that half of every marriage will end in divorce. The 50% figure is an estimate of the likelihood that couples marrying this year will end their marriage by divorce at some point in the future (Doherty, 2015). In the U.S., this rate may continue to rise as couples reach unexpected differences and conflict within their relationships. Another group that has higher needs for support, are the couples who are on the brink. On the brink refers to when a person is in the middle of a decision about divorce. While the existing research on these types of couples is limited, they do represent a meaningful subset of roughly 30% of couples who attend therapy (Doherty, Harris & Wilde, 2016).

Divorce is still a taboo topic in our society. It is a highly emotionally charged topic that involves choosing to weigh the alternatives and consider the impact of terminating a marriage (Konstam et al., 2016). According to the Doherty Relationship Institute (2016), 25% of individuals in any given year give serious thought to divorce. Research in this area has been done to further explore the stigma surrounding divorce, specifically among women in their 20’s to 30’s. The divorce rate for women in the United States is 36.6% for ages 20 to 24, 16.4% for ages 25 to 29, and 13.6% for ages 30 to 39 (Konstam et al., 2016).

Within their body of research, Konestram et al. (2016) discovered that divorce rates have increased over time, but they have risen significantly for individuals ages 20 to 29. The first empirical study on attitudes towards reconciliation during the divorce process was conducted by
Doherty, Peterson, and Willoughby, (2016), who surveyed a sample of 2,484 divorcing parents. They found that about 25% of individual parents indicated a belief that their marriage could still be saved, and about 30% indicated an interest in reconciliation services.

**Community Factors to Consider**

Across the United States, rates of marital and long-term relationship distress are high, and chronic relationship problems are related to significant mental and physical health problems for partners and their children (Wischkaemper et al., 2020). There is a strong link between our own mental health concerns and the way we cope and perceive these concerns within an intimate relationship. Keeping in mind we all come into our current relationships with our own stories, feelings, and experiences related to mental health issues. Many well-equipped treatment modalities and systems are in place to improve these areas of concern among families and couples. Discernment counseling and Couples and Family Therapy are certainly two prime and powerful examples of this.

However, rates of seeking professional help for marital and long-term relationship issues are low, and latencies between identifying a relationship problem and getting help for it are significant (Wischkaemper et al., 2020). In some cases, a major impediment is a lack of information about available services due to lower social supports and access to treatment resources (Wischkaemper et al., 2020). The following training program can help provide information and create more availability of services to all community members regardless of their socio-economic status. There are additional demographic factors that impact access to couples’ treatment which include racial/ethnic identity, income status, gender, parenthood status, marital status, and level of relationship distress (Wischkaemper et al., 2020).
There is a stigma associated with divorce and relationship issues (Konstam et al., 2016). Research on divorce and the impact this stigma leaves on people has been inactive for the last two decades. The role of the community comes into play by supporting the individual's sense of self-worth after an event like divorce or when they are at higher risk for divorce.

**Limitations of Marital Counseling**

There are a few areas for future counselors to be mindful of when it comes to discernment counseling. Doherty, Harris and Wilde (2016) several observations concerning the use of couples' therapy interventions on mixed agenda couples. One of these observations is focused on the past instead of decisions about the future. Additionally, counselors have struggled with not moving at a pace that challenges the partner leaning out, being too afraid to challenge the role of the leaning out partner (Doherty, Harris & Wilde, 2016). Counselors can also struggle with not preparing and providing time for post-individual summaries to be shared between the couple, and not bringing reflections made in individual sessions into couples’ sessions due to the fear of breaking confidentiality (Doherty, Harris & Wilde, 2016).

Another aspect to be aware of is that no direct conclusions can be drawn about the efficacy of discernment counseling for preventing unnecessary divorces, averting premature divorce decisions, or fostering more constructive forces (Doherty, Harris & Wilde, 2016). Discernment counseling offers an alternative approach for counselors to meet spouses where they are at, divided or undecided about their next steps, while also trying to meet the needs of both individuals (Seedall, Doherty & Harris, 2017). Nevertheless, discernment counseling is a promising approach to changing the way people think and feel about couples counseling, as well as the confidence they have that it will promote change in their life.
Wischkaemper et al. (2020) discussed how engaging in dyadic therapies can be particularly difficult, given that joint treatment requires both partners to have time in their work schedule and find childcare if necessary. Ultimately, it is important to ensure that counselors receive proper training to effectively implement supportive approaches to the therapeutic process such as discernment. It is important to recognize that saving every marriage is not always possible. Meanwhile, members of the community deserve to know that there is a form of treatment that seeks to meet them exactly where they are. While working to bring them the self-awareness that they desire, which will serve them on any future path. Equipping them with healthy strategies and resources to use in new marriages and relationships to continue making improvements is also a goal of discernment counseling. This is the very complex world of married life, but discernment counseling seeks to address struggling couples whether relationship problems are small (bickering over daily chores) or much bigger (considering whether to exit your marriage).

**Conclusion**

A strong correlation can be made from this analysis of marital functioning and psychological distress. Many theoretical articles, reviews of the literature, and empirical studies have indicated that when marital distress is present, the risk of psychological distress, depression, or anxiety is higher (Villeneuve et al., 2014). When it comes to individuals seeking support in addressing mental health problems, understanding the true connection between marital functioning and psychological distress is necessary. Psychological distress at any time in life is a major health problem because it can come with significant effects on our well-being and overall functioning (Villeneuve et al., 2014). Another study that supports these findings concluded that marital disruption/divorce may create an emotional vulnerability to role stressors and divorced
individuals seem to have more mental health issues (Cotten, 1999). For the reasons stated, it is necessary to provide additional training and information on approaches to address these issues.

Overall, an alternative approach to addressing marital distress is needed. Individuals deserve to be met where they are in their relationship struggles. Discernment counseling is a unique, more effective way to help couples with high levels of distress and ambivalence make well-informed and amicable decisions on the outcome of their marriage. Discernment counseling can help individuals and couples by allowing them to feel confident and certain in what they decide for themselves, their children, and their future. This type of counseling is often unheard of and not widely talked about by both counselors and members of the community. Discernment is the most viable solution to provide the type of counseling that can target couples’ unique goals and needs if their relationship is on the brink. The goal of this training is to increase education and awareness on this type of therapy that will help you get clear on what may and may not be possible.

**Introduction to Training**

This training introduces Discernment Counseling and provides information on how this type of marriage therapy is the one approach that can potentially turn the tides for couples on the brink. The target population is community members interested in learning more about topics like marital counseling, divorce, and seeking support for addressing ambivalence in their relationship. This is a two hour training that will take place via zoom and is offered for members of the Fargo-Moorhead and Grand Forks surrounding areas; educational sessions will be held once a month for members of these communities. Marketing for this training will consist of referrals, using social media platforms, and hanging posters within the community. The training was based upon the current literature which indicates that levels of ambivalence have elevated among
couples divorcing as well as a need for practices that will address this binding place that couples can find themselves in. In the U.S., divorce rates are expected to continue to increase and as a result, a more conscious and proactive approach is needed to help couples on the brink of divorce. It is important for mixed agenda couples to know there is a space that is designed to meet them exactly as they are and help them gain clarity about positive change.

This training is intended to be interactive and to create meaningful conversations around the topic of ambivalence in relationships and decisions about divorce. The style of this training is intended to be very conversational, during the powerpoint there will be opportunities for the audience to reflect individually and in small group break out sessions. The training includes real life experiences and scenarios relating to marital distress to increase audience engagement. The training will be presented in a workshop format with all forms of feedback being sent via email. Email addresses of all participants will be collected when they sign up for the training. There will also be a series of short 10-15 minute breaks throughout the training. This training should be led by an individual with a master’s degree or higher in education in psychology or counseling, experience in clinical mental health or marriage and family counseling is preferred. Evaluation forms will be used both before and after the training and they will be sent to participants via email. The intended purpose of the pre-workshop evaluation is to assess background knowledge regarding discernment counseling, service providers within the area, and concerns or issues about this type of counseling. The post evaluation form is intended to provide constructive feedback on the content, overall expectations and experience during the training.

**Training Slide Presentation Outline**

Slide 1- Title Slide- Discernment Counseling: Realities of Modern Couples in Distress
Slide 2- Marriage Counseling Lingo

Marriage Counseling Lingo:

- **Mixed-agenda**: This means that one person really wants the relationship to work, and the other person is feeling ambivalent.

- **Leaning out partner**: may not be sure if they want to stay married, is considering divorce, or has mentioned divorce to their partner.

- **Leaning in partner**: committed to repairing the marriage and seeking counseling to improve the relationship.

- **On the brink**: refers to when a person is in the middle of a decision about divorce.
Why Divorce?

**MYTHS:**
1. Divorce is a one and done decision.
2. "We decided to divorce." It's a mutual decision.
3. You need both spouses to be fully on board with working on their marriage in order for therapy to be useful for them.
4. Half of all marriages will end in divorce.

**REALITIES:**
1. It’s usually prolonged and can go up and down for months or years, before even being mentioned by one spouse.
2. It’s very rare that both spouses want the divorce.
3. There is a type of couples counseling that can help when one person wants the marriage and the other is uncertain about whether the marriage can be saved (leaning out).
4. There are so many other factors that contribute to the risk of divorce for couples. The 50% refers to an estimate of the likelihood.

---

Top Reasons for Modern Divorce

- In your opinion, what is the number one reason why marriages end?
  - The most common responses are—affairs, conflicts about money or being in a really bad marriage.

According to, Doherty Relationship Institute the number one reason for divorce is growing apart.
  - Which consists of a lot of micro decisions not to make time or communicate with each other.

**Two Categories for Divorce Decisions:**

1) **Hard Reasons:**
   - Affairs
   - Abuse
   - Addiction

2) **Soft Reasons:**
   - Growing apart
   - Poor communication
   - Arguments about money
Slide 5- Divorce Ambivalence Prevalence

- 25% of married individuals in any given year, give serious thought to divorce.
- According to Doherty (2015), in couples who have already filed for divorce, as many as 40% have a mixed agenda.
- Currently in the U.S., it is reported that 50% of married couples file for divorce. (Manning, Payne, & Stykes, 2017).
- In the U.S., this rate may continue to rise as couples reach unexpected differences and conflict within their relationships.

Slide 6- A Solution

A solution:

Self-reflection:
- What have you heard about the support that couples counseling can provide counseling?
- Do you feel prepared and that you know what to expect?
- What have you heard about counseling options for couples with mixed-agendas?

Have you ever...heard of Discernment Counseling?

- Couples with mixed agendas (on the brink of divorce) do respond differently to therapeutic interventions.
  - Then couples with the same agenda and as a result, their risk factor for divorce is higher.
- Couples who are on the brink of divorce represent a subset of roughly 30% of couples who attend therapy (Doherty, Harris & Wilde, 2016).
Slide 7 - Introduction to Discernment Counseling

A type of couples counseling fit for relationship ambivalence:

- The high interest and need to address divorce ambivalence became evident and as a result Doherty developed an intervention for these couples that he called "Discernment Counseling".

**Discernment Counseling:**

- Couples come out of Discernment Counseling with a decision.
- Brief no more than 5 sessions
- The goal is not to solve the marital problems right now, but to develop clarity and confidence in the direction of the marriage
- Time is spent with each spouse separately to help them get clearer on:
  - The problems and their contribution to them
  - What the future might look like

Slide 8 - Is Discernment Counseling for me?

**Is Discernment Counseling for me?**

**If someone is...**

- At a standstill in your relationship, unsure whether you want to stay together or get divorced.
- Wondering if you both are capable of fixing relationship problems?
- On a different page then their partner about the outcome of their marriage.
- Concerned because their partner has mentioned divorce.

**It is not suitable when:**

- One spouse has firmly decided to divorce and now wants the other to accept the divorce.
- One spouse is coercing or manipulating the other to participate.
- There is a danger of domestic violence.
- There is an Order of Protection from the court.
Slide 9- Differentiation of Traditional Marriage Counseling vs. Discernment Counseling

**Differentiation of Traditional Marriage Counseling vs. Discernment Counseling**

**Traditional Marriage Counseling:**
- Objective: improve connection and health of relationship.
- Longer direction 6 months +
- Counselor creates a treatment plan with the goal of improving the relationship.

**Discernment Counseling:**
- Objective: couples on the brink making a definitive decision on the direction of their relationship.
- Short-term 1-5 sessions
- Counselor supports you in finding out what is best for you, your spouse and family.

---

Slide 10- Traditional Marriage Counseling

**Traditional Marriage Counseling**

**Who is it for:**
- Committed to but struggling to make your marriage work
- Communication is poor with you and your partner
- You are a motivated couple to resolve conflicts
- Unmarried couples too
- Wanting to work through issues such as:
  - Infidelity
  - Unproductive arguments
  - Difficulty navigating conflict or other hot button topics.

**It is not suitable when:**
- Domestic violence
- Substance Abuse
- When one partner is considering or has asked for a divorce
- Individual therapy is a better first step.
- You are prepared to only do work in sessions
- You and your partner have different agendas
- It is used to avoid/prevent divorce
Slide 11- Closer Look at Discernment Counseling

- A discernment counselor will create a safe container for the couple to speak openly about where their marriage is at.
- Both partners get a chance to view their partner’s perspective
- Most common misconception is that this is couple’s therapy. It is about understanding couple’s dynamics. This is one of the biggest barriers for people to come in.
- A space free from the opinions of friends and family, or others
  - Giving couples a chance to fully explore the choices available to them.
Slide 12 - Treatment Process

Treatment Process

Discernment Counseling includes:

1-5 sessions. You're committing at first to just one session. Then you can decide to do more sessions up to five. The sessions are 1.5-2 hours in length.

Sessions are divided between the couple together and individual sessions.

More time is spent in individual sessions due to each person being on a personal journey of discernment and action.

Slide 13 - Client Outcomes

Client Outcomes

Focus on helping people decide among three paths:

1. Move towards divorce
2. Try to restore their marriage to health
   • Commit to 6 months of traditional couple's therapy
3. Stay the course and decide later
Slide 14- F-M Community Resources

F-M Community Resources:

- Take out your cell phone
- Scan this QR Code and save the browser in your phone for Marriage and Couples Counselors in the Fargo- Moorhead area.

There is 1 discernment counselor in the State of ND. Heather Guttorson at Center for Relationships and Sexual Wellness
  P: 701-478-4144

Slide 15- Grand Forks Community Resources

Grand Forks Community Resources:

- Take out your cell phone
- Scan this QR Code and save the browser in your phone for Marriage and Couples Counselors in Grand Forks.
Questions

Now is the time to ask any/all questions about:
- Discernment Counseling
- Gaining access to this type of counseling in your community
- Follow up questions to this presentation

Slide 17- Evaluation
Slide 18- Conclusion

Next steps: Share the community resource with a family member or friend who made need them. Or use them for your own marital needs.

Contact information:
Maranda Jacobson
Clinical Mental Health Counselor
Student, LAOC

Slide 19- Resources

Resources

References


Appendix A

Pre-workshop Survey: Marriage Counseling

*Sent as a Google Form via email*

Name: __________________________________

Email address: (delivery of workshop link) _______________________________________

How do you hear about the event?

☐ Friends
☐ Place of Employment
☐ Flyer
☐ Facebook Advertisement

What is the date of the workshop you are attending? _______________________________

Have you ever attended couples therapy? Y / N

What are three things you know/have heard about marriage counseling?

Do you know of any marriage counseling providers or agencies near you? Y / N

(If yes please list names) ______________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

What are three concerns/issues you have with marriage counseling?
What questions do you have and/or what do you hope to have answered/addressed in this workshop?

Anything else?
Appendix B

Discernment Counseling Workshop Evaluation Form

Date: ____________ Name of Presenter: ________________________________

How did you hear about this presentation? _________________________________

Overall, how would you rate this workshop?

*Please rate your responses according to the following scale:
1- not at all useful, 2- slightly useful, 3- undecided, 4- very useful, 5- extremely useful*

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<th></th>
<th>1- not at all useful</th>
<th>2- slightly useful</th>
<th>3- undecided</th>
<th>4- very useful</th>
<th>5- extremely useful</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How would you rate the usefulness of content?</td>
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<td>2. How would you rate the speaker's knowledge on the subject?</td>
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<td>3. How did the session compare to your expectations?</td>
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<td>4. How would you rate the speaker’s presentation skills (style of teaching and communication)?</td>
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<td>5. Rate your overall experience with this workshop?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

6. How would you rate the pace of the presentation? (Too fast | Too slow | Just right)

7. What percentage of this information was new to you? (100%, 75%, 50%, 25%, 0%)

8. What did you like best or find most useful about this presentation?
9. What did you like least and find least helpful about this presentation?

10. How likely are you to recommend this to a family member/friend? (with 10 being most likely to recommend)

Other comments: