

FAMILY & CONSUMER *sciences*

Marriage Enrichment: *Getting Ready for Marriage*

Jokes are made about it. Perceptions about it range from blessing to curse. Scientists study it, preachers preach about it, therapists help to salvage it, popular magazines offer self-help tips on improving it, tabloids exploit it, participants misunderstand it, and the general public is led to believe it is doomed. Yet it is recognized as one of the first social relationships, and many still hail it as a basic building block of society. "It," of course, is marriage.

Marriage remains popular in the America, despite the high divorce rate and negative stereotypes in movies and on television. Many couples still believe the ideal of one man and one woman committed to a lifelong marital relationship. These couples sincerely vow to remain in their marriage "til death do us part." In fact, marriage can be a truly satisfying and lifelong experience but making it work takes commitment, planning, and a good deal of effort.

Perhaps one of the biggest stumbling blocks for engaged couples is their failure to see things realistically. Caught up in the romance and in the excitement of wedding plans, many couples are unable to envision what their relationship will be like on a routine, day-to-day basis. For those anticipating a Cinderella-like happily-ever-after storybook marriage, disappointment is likely to come. Conflict, crises, and daily stress are a part of virtually every marriage.

One of the most accurate words to describe a new marriage is "change." Anything that can be done to help prepare for the inevitable changes of marriage is a good investment in the relationship. Also, discussing money, children, role expectations, sex, in-laws, and other important issues before marriage will help set the stage for a smoother relationship. The rest of this publication will discuss these and other important issues in getting ready for marriage.

Adapting to Change

Change produces stress. It requires some kind of adaptation. Although a lot of changes involved in getting married are seen as positive changes, they still produce stress. Judith Wallerstein, in her book entitled *The Good Marriage: How and Why Love Lasts*, says that the common thread characterizing good marriages is *flexibility*. Couples who have the ability to adapt to unexpected change, plus a "marvelous facility for looking down the road" and anticipating the potholes and detours of life, are more likely to have a strong and lasting relationship.

Some of the more obvious changes and differences that most couples will have to face include:

- * *Change in lifestyle*. You may have to struggle and gradually work toward a standard of living that is

satisfactory to both of you.

This is a common challenge.

- * *Change in location.* Either you or your future spouse may have to move away from home and family. While there is a degree of sadness involved in such a move, many couples find new places and new people to be fun and exciting.
- * *Change of friends.* Whether you will relocate or stay in your present location there is a good chance that you may lose contact with many of your old friends. Getting married will change your social status. You will probably get acquainted and make friends with other married couples, rather than socialize as much with your single friends. Also, you and your fiancé may have different circles of friends and neither of you may feel as close to the other's friends after you marry.
- * *Differences in the way you do things.* Before you get very far into the marriage, you will probably find that your personal habits and traditions are somewhat different from those of your new spouse. It may involve something as simple as where you squeeze the toothpaste tube, rinsing the tub after your shower, or folding underwear. Or differences may be of greater traditional or person signifi-

cance, such as birthday or anniversary celebrations; you may enjoy parties with lots of friends, while your spouse thinks a card and a quiet evening at home with pizza will suffice.

- * *Differences of opinion.* No matter how much alike you think you and your fiancé are, you won't always see eye to eye on every subject or issue. You may have different opinions on things that directly affect your family, such as child-rearing, money management, or religion. Or you may have separate views on politics and world events. Differences of opinion don't make either of you wrong, just different.
- * *Change in attitude.* After you are married, attitudes may change. You may view your world and your relationship a little less idealistically. That doesn't mean doom and gloom; it just means that you are maturing and you see more of the realities of living on your own as a married couple. Some aspects of your spouse may also seem less than ideal after a while.
- * *Changes in personality.* Because of changes in your new spouse's behavior, you may think that his or her personality has changed. In reality, you may only see the *real* personality after you are married. Before marriage, each of you may be working

really hard at impressing the other, including pretending to be something you're not. After getting married, many people "let their hair down" and stop pretending. It appears to be an abrupt personality change.

- * *Change in appearance.* During your engagement, you and your fiancé may always be neat, clean, and well-groomed. As a married couple, however, you will see each other under every conceivable circumstance and the appearance will sometimes be sloppy. Later in the marriage, uncontrollable changes in appearance may occur because of the aging process or because of health problems.
- * *Different expectations.* Both you and your spouse will enter marriage with a set of expectations, some of which will be quite different from the other's. You may expect that the romance will never fade in your relationship; your spouse may not be naturally romantic. Each of you have expectations regarding various roles you will play in the marriage. The woman may expect that she will have a career, and the household chores will be shared equally. The man, however, may be somewhat traditional and may see cooking and cleaning as his wife's responsibility. Role expect-

tations are not as clear cut in the 1990s as they once were. Communicate honestly about expectations before the wedding takes place.

- * *Having children.* The choice of whether to have children should also be carefully discussed before marriage. Also to be considered are the number of children desired and the timing of their arrival. While children can bring a sense of joy and fulfillment to many couples, they are also a tremendous and costly responsibility. And the presence of children will affect the dynamics of the couple's relationship, both positively and negatively.



Realistic Expectations

Many, if not most, expectations for marriage are based on idealized myths. If realities within a relationship do not match the myth, one or both partners may think they have made a terrible mistake. A few of the myths about marriage are:

MYTH: *A good marriage will always be romantic.*

REALITY: Virtually all couples experience peaks and valleys. While many couples hope that romance will be a constant theme throughout the marriage, other realities of married life often cloud over the romantic feelings. Scott Peck, in his book *The Road Less Traveled*, stated "Every couple falls in love; every couple falls out of love." Just because the *feelings of love* are not always present doesn't necessarily mean a lack of love; love is more of a choice than a feeling.

MYTH: *Marriage will make me happy.*

REALITY: A marriage partner does not have the power or ability to *make* another person happy. Each person's sense of happiness must come from deep inside. Relationship in marriage has the potential of complementing individual happiness and well-being, but it cannot be the primary source.

MYTH: *If we really love each other, everything else will fall into place.*

REALITY: Marriage needs constant nurturing. Because of individual, societal, and environmental changes, marriage is always in a state of flux; it is a dynamic relationship rather than a static one. Constant sensitivity to one another's needs and

continual adaptation to relational changes are necessary to keep love alive.

MYTH: *My partner should intuitively know my needs.*

REALITY: Regardless of a spouse's intelligence or personal strengths, it is not possible to read a partner's mind. Needs for security, affection, emotional support, encouragement, or physical assistance often must be verbalized in clear language, sometimes repeatedly. Before a need can be met, that need must be known.

MYTH: *Conflict means a lack of love.*

REALITY: Conflict is inevitable, but it doesn't have to cause permanent damage to the marriage relationship. Partners have different viewpoints and different feelings based on their background and previous experiences. Those differences do not mean that one partner is right and the other wrong; it just means they are not alike in their thoughts or feelings. Conflict, when dealt with appropriately, can be healthy for a relationship in that new ideas and new ways of looking at things are introduced to the partners and to the relationship.

Finances

Few couples, especially in the early years of marriage, are wealthy. That means a lot of difficult decisions must be

made. Some important questions pertaining to a couple's finances include:

1. Who earns the money, one or both?
2. What will the money be spent for?
3. Who will manage the family income?
4. What is each person's attitude about credit spending?
5. Can we save? If so, how much?
6. Should we buy a house or a trailer, or rent?
7. What is yours, what is mine, and what is ours?

These are only examples of the kinds of financial issues with which married couples have to struggle. According to marriage counselors, conflict over money is one of the primary reasons given by couples for seeking professional help. Serious conflict may be avoided, however, if attitudes and philosophies about finances are clearly communicated before marriage, and continue during the marriage.

Sexual Adjustment

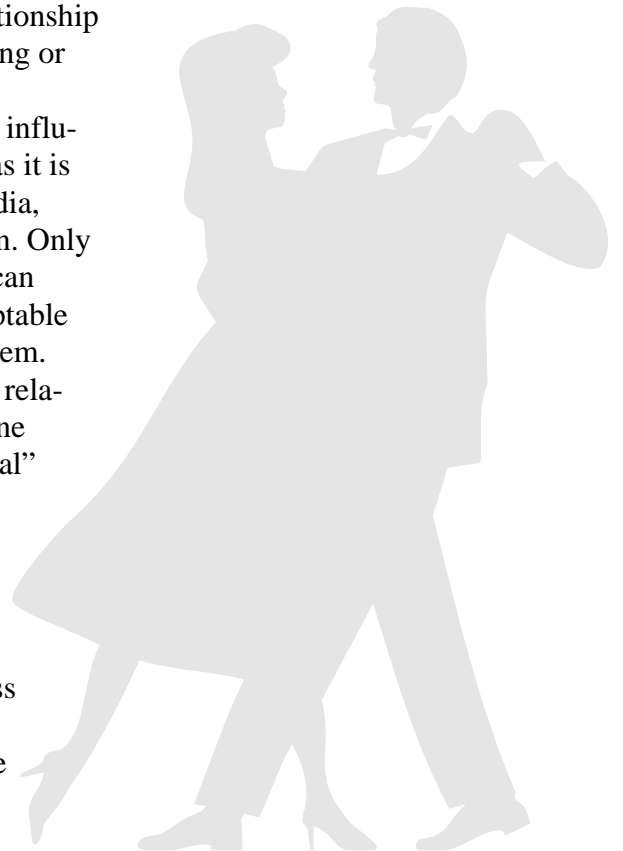
Sexual attraction plays a major part in bringing two people together and into marriage. A major component of continued satisfaction in marriage is a quality sexual relationship. A mutually satisfying sexual relationship, however, does not just happen automatically. As with other aspects of personality, each partner's sexuality is individual. Each person should approach the

sexual relationship with respect and understanding for the other. Some general observations and considerations about the sexual relationship might include the following:

- * Sexual relationship and other aspects of marital life are interrelated. For example, conflict or intense concern over money can lessen sexual interest.
- * Each partner's beliefs about what is "right" and what is "wrong" in sex life should be honored and respected. There are no "rights" and "wrongs" in marriage other than what each person believes to be right and wrong.
- * As long as both partners agree, it is a good idea to experiment with ways to keep the sexual relationship from becoming boring or routine.
- * Try not to be overly influenced by sexuality as it is portrayed in the media, movies, or television. Only the married couple can decide what is acceptable and satisfying for them. Don't try to fit your relationship into someone else's idea of "normal" sexual behavior.
- * Continue to learn more about your partner rather than about specific sex techniques. Maleness and femaleness is mysterious; try to be open to learning about that mystery.

- * Don't make sex a weapon in dealing with other conflicts in your relationship. To do so will only magnify the original problem, and can lead to sexual problems as well.

As with other issues in the marriage partnership, a satisfying sex life depends on open channels of communication. Try to deal with conflicts as they arise so that they won't have an adverse effect on your sexual relationship. It is difficult to be romantic or sexually responsive when other problems in the relationship have not been resolved. Don't be afraid to discuss sex with your partner. Share your likes, dislikes, feelings, desires, fantasies, etc. Share and learn together.



Marrying the Whole Family-In-laws

Like it or not, marrying someone usually involves the formation of several relationships. You may gain, depending on family structure, a father-in-law, a mother-in-law, sisters- or brothers-in-law, step-in-laws, and a variety of extended family members. Although you don't technically marry the whole family, your relationship to your spouse may be influenced by how well you get along with his or her family. It is also important to remember that your spouse will likely reflect the values, attitudes, personality, and behaviors you see in the family.

Helpful hints for a positive relationship with your future new family include:

- * Respect your in-laws as family members of the spouse you love.
- * Don't compare your spouse's family with your own.
- * Don't run to your own parents for emotional support when you have conflict with

your spouse. Doing so could set the stage for hard feelings between your parents and your spouse.

- * Don't direct anger you may feel for your spouse toward his or her family.
- * Establish a family atmosphere that avoids a contest between your two families for your time, attention, affection, etc.
- * Try to treat both families as fairly as possible in terms of holiday visits, routine time together, and remembering special occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries.
- * As a couple, try to establish as much independence from both families as possible. Except for emergency situations, try to make it on your own.

Conclusion

The ideas explored and the suggestions made in this publication are far from exhaustive.

They merely set the stage for opening communication related to a variety of potential conflict areas in marriage. Couples who take the time and effort to educate themselves about quality relationships and who practice effective communication skills in their interactions with each other have a greater likelihood of experiencing a satisfying, fulfilling relationship together for many years.

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