

FAMILY & CONSUMER *sciences*

Marriage Enrichment: *Decision Making*

Decisions, decisions, decisions! They are an ever-present reality.

What do I want to do for a living? What skills are needed? Do I want to go to college? Will I marry; if so, to whom? What do I want for my life? These seemingly universal dilemmas demand sharp decision making on a personal level.

In what city should we live? Are we able to buy a house or a mobile home? Or do we rent? Will this neighborhood be safe? Can we afford a car? Do we plan to have children? Will we both find employment? These are just some of the questions a married couple faces, especially in the early years of the relationship. They are questions that require decisions.

In a much larger context, adapting to a world now changing at a phenomenal rate puts a strain on most social institutions, including marriage. Change is the source of stress and our response to that change involves making decisions.

The amount of stress generated by change largely depends upon the couple's perception of the demands they are facing and the resources they feel are available to them. To reduce the perceived demand, marriage partners talk about and share perceptions, thoughts, and feelings with one another and make decisions. Couples with faulty communication patterns will feel more stressed.

Today's stressful work environment, fewer social support programs, social-

ization by the media, and a variety of developmental and social changes may have had a negative impact marriage. If couples are to remain intact and successfully in weather the pressures they encounter, they must learn effective ways to adapt to both expected and unexpected change through effective decision making.

Some stress is normal. Couples can expect stress from events such as the birth of a child, children becoming more independent, family members growing older, normal changes in the marital relationship, and eventual retirement. But unexpected changes, such as unemployment, untimely death of a family member, birth of a disabled child, development of chronic illness, or substance abuse by a family member, may cause more acute strain.

How couples resolve the problems that arise when these stressors pile up depends a great deal upon their day-to-day patterns of interaction and communication. Very early, marriage partners develop ways of behaving with each other. Patterns arise from roles that each partner chooses to play or is forced to play at the couple attempts to fulfill both individual and marital goals. These structures help to make married life more predictable for both partners, even when the predictable is negative.

Stress in marriage can be either controlled or compounded. The following can serve as a check to see

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what happens when you and your spouse are under pressure. Check all that apply:

WHEN THERE IS A PROBLEM IN OUR MARRIAGE, WE ...

- Support one another
- Get uptight and yell
- Fall apart
- Stop talking and withdraw
- Consider each partner's viewpoint
- Take sides
- Look for a scapegoat.
- Look consciously at *every* alternative, whether it seems reasonable at first or not
- Leave the decision making up to one person
- Seek outside counseling
- Ignore the problem until it changes or goes away
- Hold grudges
- Increase use of substances such as alcohol or other drugs
- Become aggressive or violent
- Use guilt, fear, or threat tactics to control one another
- Talk about it
- Cover it up
- Become sarcastic

Now consider each item.

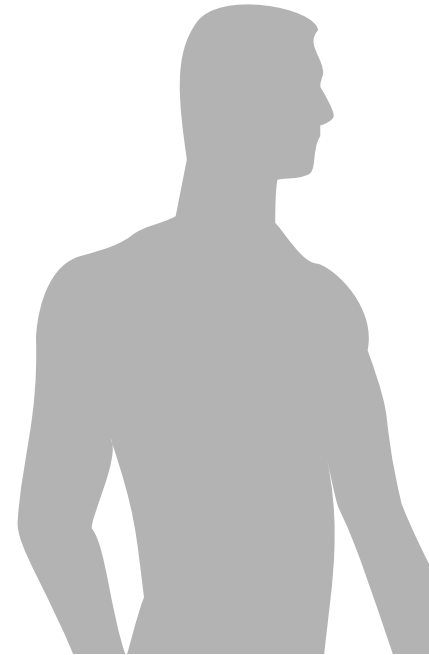
What kinds of behaviors are positive? Which ones need to be replaced by more constructive behaviors? Which behavior should be acted on first? Will the couple be able to make these changes itself? When strategies are not effective and the problem continues to hurt the relationship, outside help is probably needed. Help can come from specialized counselors such as financial counselors, mental health professionals, marriage counselors, clergy persons, or experts in the area of conflict causing the problem.

Decision making in marriage is a lot like conflict management; the hardest decisions to make are those about which husband and wife disagree. When a change occurs or a problem arises that demands adaptation or resolution, each partner has his or her opinion and ideas about how to address the issue. Personality, family background, values, culture, and personal preferences all come into play. Effective decisions are best made in an atmosphere where each partner is respected, listened to, affirmed, and understood.

Strategies for Decision Making

Four key steps in making the best possible decisions as a married couple are:

1. Collect all facts, information, data, etc., related to the problem.

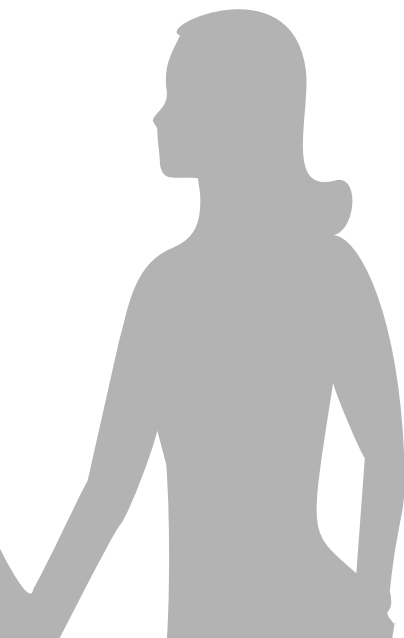


2. Listen carefully and attentively to the each other's point of view.
3. Brainstorm. When you both are ready to look at alternatives, come up with as many as possible. Try to come up with a plan you both can accept.
4. Summarize areas that both of you agree upon.

Other important strategies are:

- * Define your feelings, needs, and what you would like to see happen.
- * Be calm. This makes it easier to discuss a problem.
- * Be positive and optimistic.
- * Respect your partner's feelings.
- * Probe each other with open-ended, non-judging questions.

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- * Discover common interests or ideas in any part of the conflict.
- * Reinforce any possible and positive positions taken by your partner.
- * Negotiate any parts of the conflict that might be ready for negotiation.
- * Try out a plan. Practice the solution. Keep up your end of the agreement.
- * Reevaluate. After a week or two, assess how the plan worked. Make any needed adjustments. Try out the new plan.

The late David Mace, respected counselor and marriage expert, offered these suggestions on couple decision-making process:

- * Be absolutely clear about what each of you wants. Allow both husband and wife, in whatever order seems best, to state what he or she recommends. The other partner listens carefully and does not interrupt. Continue this until there is a clear explanation of each side.
- * Do not let the discussion escalate into a fight.
- * Once the two views are heard and clearly understood, calmly discuss any questions that may have arisen about each other's point of view.
- * After all views and questions have been discussed to both partners' satisfaction, it is time to make the decision. If disagreement still exists, some possible solutions might be:
 1. I will accept your wishes if you, in turn, show your goodwill by accepting mine in another matter—now or later. In other words, you will owe me your cooperation in a different situation. We will have to agree that each of us will make a sacrifice for the other, now or later.
 2. I will accept your wishes as an act of love and appreciation. You will realize that I am making a sacrifice to please you. If we have a decision to make

later, you will try to express your gratitude for this.

3. Is there some way you can express your gratitude for my willingness to accept your wishes in this matter? Can you thank me specially? Will you consider letting me have something I want in the future—something you can give me to express your gratitude?

Although you may not verbalize your cooperation in these exact words, if both partners approach the resolution of a problem with these kind of attitudes you are more likely to achieve a “win-win” solution. This approach can enhance the quality of the marriage relationship as you demonstrate your love for each other when you have a difference of opinion. The notion of sacrificial giving is not altogether popular in modern American culture, but couples enjoying a strong relationship have found the value in it.

References:

- Mace, David (1989). *Marriage and Family Newsletter*, October issue.
- Wood, Britton (1995). Peer marriage. *Family Information Services*, November issue, 45-55.



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