

10 WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR MARRIAGE

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These 10 areas describe skills that are important to anyone wanting to get married or stay married:

1. EXPECTATIONS- What are your expectations from marriage and do you know the 6 stages that all marriages (including yours) will go through?
2. COMMUNICATION – Why is this the one area that all the experts agree is the most important in a relationship?
3. EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS – What role do the emotions and feelings of each partner play in a good marriage – or in a really bad one?
4. MANAGING TIME AND MONEY – Couples have to be very practical and realistic in this important area too!
5. CONFLICT - All marital conflict probably boils down to one thing. Want to know what it is?
6. GENDER ROLES - Who does what and why around here?
7. MANAGING DISAPPOINTMENT – This is a key skill in any relationship!
8. EDUCATION AND INTELLIGENCE – How important is it in a marriage?
9. SEX – What’s the role of physical attraction in love and marriage?
10. LOVE – How does “teenage” love (at any age) become the “adult” love that lasts a lifetime?

Here are some brief thoughts on each of these important areas:

1. EXPECTATIONS - Most of us expect a lot from marriage and most of us want to make it the most important relationship of our lives, surviving well past the years when we are raising our children. All marriages pass through 6 essential stages:
 - 1 the honeymoon/romantic phase – which propels us thru courtship to committed marriage believing this person will meet all our needs
 - 2 the compromise phase – when expectations must be adjusted to conform to reality and to human limitations
 - 3 the power struggle phase – a fight for influence and control involving a need to negotiate how (or if) one’s needs will get met and what that will cost
 - 4 the fight/flight phase – involving competition to emerge as an independent individual with separate needs, goals, and priorities from the partner

5 the cooperation phase – when each partner successfully reconciles to the need to constructively build their own unique identity within a less than perfect union

6 the acceptance phase – where collaboration and partnership bring stability in which each partner is accepting of the other's unique personality and habits

2. COMMUNICATION - is the basis for all human relationships, in or out of marriage. And communication can be verbal, in which we use primarily words and language to express ourselves, or communication can be non-verbal, involving posture, attitude, body language, and behaviors. As a matter of fact, it is impossible **not** to communicate - because all behavior is a form of communication. As any married person knows, not talking says a lot!

3. EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS - It is most important that we choose how we want to feel regardless of our circumstances, rather than having our circumstances decide our feelings for us! Some feelings energize/ others paralyze- feelings such as fear, jealousy, or special entitlement can cripple a marriage. Most of what gets us in trouble in our marriage and even in life are strong feelings which are not influenced also by our calm, logical thinking. How you think determines how you feel. So thinking negatively will get you to feel negatively.

In really bad marriages, or in the bad part of pretty good marriages, feelings that are selfish, irresponsible, unfair, immature, self-centered, etc are the ones that spoil the marriage. Therefore, again it is important for each partner to take responsibility for their own negative feelings – and the thinking behind those feelings- and not try to make their partner the responsible party. No one can make you feel a certain way – that is your own doing. So learning to manage and be responsible for your own feelings of happiness is crucial to a happy marriage and to a happy life. Your happiness requires your effort!

4. MANAGING TIME AND MONEY - How you spend your time and money is where you really live everyday. It is your real life. Other than health, your time and your money are probably your most important priorities. So incompatibility with your spouse in this area can make day to day marriage a real drag.

As marriage therapists, we often ask couples to describe what an ideal day, doing anything they want, would look like. This may also suggest what people would expect from their vacations too.

Conflicts about money can represent many other issues in the marriage, such as struggles over power and control, issues of trust, and feelings of being taken care of or of being cheated out of what is due us. In a 2 income couple, it is often recommended that each person have their own personal checking account for their own direct personal expenses, plus each contribute to a 3rd joint checking and perhaps savings account for common expenses such as rent or mortgage payments, utilities, household expenses, etc.

5. CONFLICT - All marital conflict is about one essential issue: the insecurity that any of us feel when our personal version of reality is not acknowledged by our partner. This drives some people nuts trying to convince the other person that they are wrong and we ourselves are entirely right. That there is only one way to see a situation, that our view of the world is correct, that our conclusions are the ones that count!

Although insecurity about not being understood, cared for, or agreed with is the essential cause of relationship conflict, the conflicts themselves can actually have many perhaps overlooked uses or “benefits” for a couple that assure that the conflicts are likely to perniciously persist:

-uses or purposes for conflict can include-

- 1 using conflict to gain control of the relationship
- 2 to establish emotional distance from the partner
- 3 to feel emotionally stimulated thru conflict
- 4 to fight for independence
- 5 to preempt the other person from hurting us

6. GENDER ROLES - There are usually 2 mandatory tasks that must be accomplished in a marriage with children: (1) 24 hour child care responsibility for the family vs (2) 24 hour financial protection of the family. Who is going to be expected to take primary responsibility for each of these 2 areas of family life? Conflicts over household duties are often the most contentious of issues, and can be the source for many hurt feelings and simmering resentments. But these roles can be negotiated to better reflect modern marriage expectations.

7. MANAGING DISAPPOINTMENT - Realistically expecting and managing disappointments is a crucial skill in marriage and in life. No one's life is an uninterrupted series of successes, and no one's marriage is either. Being disappointed in your spouse does not give you the right to be hateful to them. To manage disappointment requires us first to evaluate realistically just what is – and is not – at stake in the situation.

An example: A husband forgets his wife's birthday! Now what exactly does this mean? Obviously this is not a good thing and almost anyone would be hurt by this kind of apparent oversight. So what is our explanation to our selves or our interpretation of what this means?

If we say this is awful and obviously my husband does not love me, then we're going to be pretty emotionally upset and we're going to try to get our partner to be upset too – at himself. If, however, we remember that he has never forgotten before, or that he has had a lot on his mind lately, or that he forgets other important events and that this is probably not intentional, we may still be justifiably concerned – but we don't have to be quite so hurt or try to hurt back with anger or try to invoke guilt. Overall, what we say to ourselves about any negative event is far more important than the event itself.

8. EDUCATION AND INTELLIGENCE - People tend to marry other people with a similar educational level. This is fortunate because a compatibility of intellectual interest or ability is very supportive of a satisfactory marriage- it gives you someone to talk to and someone you will probably feel is worth listening to, at least most of the time.

Many people may not have the advantage of an advanced education, but if both members of a couple share a common interest or curiosity about the world around them, they will enjoy this part of their life together too. The only meaningful difference between people is their ability to learn. If you and your mate are similar in this area, you'll have a lot more to talk about with enjoyment – and that strengthens a marriage.

9. SEX - Physical or sexual attraction is the “chemistry” or excitement that people feel for one another at the beginning, as they get to know one another. It can make any of us a little crazy or intoxicated with love . This temporary romantic insanity has a cure, however: it’s called marriage.

The role of physical attraction is essential in getting a relationship started, and it often remains more important to men than to women later on in a relationship.

Women tolerate or overlook physical changes or flaws in their partner much more than men are likely to do. Not that married people cannot enjoy a real romantic and sexually exciting relationship – especially in bed. But over time some of that sexual energy and pre-occupation has to be channeled into everyday life in order to build a life and perhaps, a family.

In marriage, there is a need for 2 different kinds of sex . One is the “romantic “ kind of sex that involves plenty of relaxed time, plenty of ambiance such as quiet music, the bubblebath, soft lights, etc.

The other is “recreational sex”, when there may not be a lot of time for preparation or only one partner has a strong interest. A good marriage needs a balance of both kinds of sex and not too much of only one kind.

Also, there are some common myths about sexuality that are gender specific:

Men tend to think that daily stresses or being tired will not diminish a wife’s interest in sex, when in fact it often does. Also, men tend to believe that sex can be used to settle or end a conflict, whereas women prefer to settle the conflict first – then perhaps have sex. Lastly, men tend to underestimate the value of romance and physical foreplay for women because it is not a necessary priority for men, sexually.

Women have a mistaken belief that if a man loves a woman he will want to be with her and talk with her all the time and will need to share his innermost feelings with her. However, most men are not like that – but that has nothing to do with how much he loves her. Also, many women assume that if a man loves her he will already know what she wants sexually without being told, whereas men actually appreciate a wife’s suggestions and interest in specific sexual activities that she is willing to request or instruct him in.

Overall, in the area of sexuality in your marriage you will not go wrong if you remember the following rule:

A man must make love in order to be in love

And a woman must be in love in order to make love.

10. LOVE - Love is such an immense subject, but there are a few simple observations that might help all of us to improve our marriage and our understanding of life itself.

First, love is not a feeling, it is a behavior! Love means having the benefit or welfare of the other person always in mind. When we first say we are in love, what we often really mean is that we need the other person for our own welfare or for our own feeling of wellbeing. Only later as love matures do we realize that real love is putting our own needs aside some of the time in order to do what is best for the other person.

This is not only the right way to love, but it has a practical value too because if we are in a significant relationship with someone else who is not happy or is not at their best, their dissatisfaction will have an effect on us too. We cannot be happy if our partner is not reasonably happy too. That’s the nature of a loving relationship; each partner is affected by the well-being of the other.

A second major principle concerning mature love is that it is patient with the faults and unfair feelings or behavior of the partner. In other words, it is easy to love someone who would always be able to be loving and kind to us. But that is not how real marriage and real life is, is it?

In our work as a licensed marital therapists with numerous couples we often have ample opportunity to point out that it is rarely total strangers that hurt us. Unless you are a crime victim or something like that, it is almost always the people we are closest to - and expect the most from - who actually hurt us or let us down. Total strangers rarely hurt us. Our spouse or families often do - not because they mean to, but because there are no perfect people and any person we are close to will eventually fail us - again, not because they necessarily want to, but because that is the nature of close relationships. There are no perfect people.

If you want your love to be adult and mature, you will not allow yourself to be unexpectedly ambushed by this fact. Instead, you will allow for the faults, unfairness, and misjudgment of your partner toward you. This has to be done with patience.

So the test of mature and adult love - the kind of love that lasts - is to be able to tolerate with patience when we ourselves are hurt, or unfairly misjudged, and unkindly misunderstood by the very person we thought and hoped -when we married them- would never do this to us.

Finally, there are many marriages in a marriage. This is because a marriage is made up of many disappointments, followed by many necessary periods of growth and healing - and most of all forgiveness - followed again by inevitable new disappointments.

One of the most important things you can do to improve your marriage is to understand what love and marriage really is - a struggle for two fallible and often lonely human beings not to let go of the other's hand as they make their way through all the journey that life has set before them.

We wish you all the best as you and your partner make your own journey!

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