

PREMARITAL COUNSELING, PART 2

Goals:

1. To finish putting together the marriage service for your wedding using your selections.
2. To answer questions that have come up since our first session.
3. To discuss issues in marriage and provide encouragement for your continued discussion.

Parts of the Discussion:

1. The stages of a good marriage.
2. The importance of open and effective communication.
3. Change in you and in your marriage partner.
4. Some particular issues in marriage that can build or erode love and partnership.

The Stages of a Good Marriage:

1. Dream
2. Disillusionment
3. Misery
4. Awakening
5. Love

Marriage has been described as the process of falling in love again with the person you married. I see it more as an ongoing series of the cycles listed above as stages. In a good, growing marriage, the cycles actually form an upward spiral so the couple does not just return to the level where they started but move upward together toward a greater and more mature love.

The first reason for discussing these stages or cycles is to realize the ups and downs are part of good marriages. Disillusionment does not have to lead to despair of ever having a good marriage together. It is normal, even necessary, and can be made creative if the couple works together.

Not all marriages can be made to work. Some are fatally flawed and destructive to both people in the marriage. But even the best marriages go through periods of discouragement, frustration, disappointment, and relational deadness.

Within a marriage that has a chance of growing and enduring, people have choices about the data they collect, process, and use. If I decide to collect, store, and use all the negative data I can find in my marriage to support the idea that “this isn’t working,” I will find plenty. If, within the same marriage, I decide to collect, store, and use positive data to support the idea, “we can make this marriage work,” I will find plenty.

The Importance of Open and Effective Communication:

- I. Some myths about communication within marriage.
 - A. Myth #1: “If my marriage partner really loved me, he/she would know how I feel without having to be told.”
 - 1. How?
 - 2. Is it fair to expect that?
 - 3. What is my goal when I think that way and build up anger, resentment, or disappointment when he/she doesn’t understand my needs and feelings?
 - B. Myth #2: “People in love should never disagree, never argue; and, if they do, something must be wrong.”
 - 1. How can two independent people live together without ever disagreeing?
 - 2. Wouldn’t it require that one always get his or her way?
 - C. Myth #3: “My background is normal. Things are done a certain way—everybody knows that.”
- II. Tactics that shut down or tune out communication.
 - A. Refusing to talk about it.
 - B. Blaming your partner.
 - 1. Puts your partner on the defensive.
 - 2. Draws battle lines.
 - 3. Makes the blame (rather than the original problem) the focus of the disagreement.
 - C. Accusing your partner of bad motives.
 - 1. Pushes blaming a step further: “Not only is it your fault, but you did it on purpose.”
 - 2. Draws hurtful conclusions from misunderstandings.

- D. Exaggerating — making the molehill into a mountain.
 - E. Generalizing — “You *always* do that.”
 - 1. Probably isn’t true.
 - 2. Makes the idea of “always” the focal point of the argument and of your partner’s defense (“No, I don’t *always* do that.” Never mind that I just did it).
 - F. Comparing — “Why can’t you be like . . . (my mother, your sister, my father, my ex-boyfriend, etc.)?”
 - 1. Humiliates.
 - 2. Builds resentment.
 - 3. Triggers the thought, “Then, why don’t you go live with (whoever it is)?”
 - G. Patronizing — what makes a person angrier than being treated like a child?
 - 1. All men are little boys.
 - 2. You’re so cute when you’re angry.
 - 3. “Here, let me explain it to you simply so you’ll understand.”
 - H. Playing to the audience — using other people’s presence to embarrass, criticize, or put down your partner.
- III. Some suggestions for improving communication with your marriage partner.
- A. The obvious: become aware of your own motives and tactics, and avoid the hurtful or unhelpful ones.
 - B. In an argument or disagreement, try not to decide what you are going to say until your partner has finished speaking. This way, you might really listen, instead of preparing your own rebuttal while your spouse is talking.
 - C. Ask yourself, “What would it be like to be married to me and be listening to what I’m saying now?”
 - D. Try to listen for what your spouse is feeling — not just the logic or illogic of the argument but the feelings and needs underneath.

- E. Avoid shaming the person you love. You can still get angry, and sometimes anger is appropriate, but avoid showing disgust. Anger focuses on a deed, a behavior, an action that has offended. Disgust and shaming reject or put down the person himself or herself. The effects are devastating and long-lasting. Think about the different responses the one you love might have to these two statements: “I am very angry at you,” or “You disgust me.”
- F. Don’t grab hold of some statement your partner has made and refuse to let it go. “But you said” Let your partner move past it. Allow the matter to be resolved.

Dealing with Change:

- I. Myths about people and change.
 - A. Myth #1: I can change him/her after we’re married.
 - 1. Forget being a reformer or new parent.
 - 2. If the person you love is selfish or irresponsible, marriage is unlikely to change him/her.
 - 3. If he’s violent or abusive, get away. Don’t walk away; run. It will only get worse after you are married.
 - 4. Same if he/she is cruel, sarcastic, demeaning.
 - 5. If your partner is a lovable, good-natured slob, don’t think you transform him/her into a fastidious Felix Unger. It won’t happen.
 - B. Myth #2: Marriage shouldn’t change my life much.
 - 1. On what planet?
 - 2. No longer can you be on your own, responsible only for and to yourself.
 - 3. No one can take a husband or wife as an enhancement to an otherwise unchanged life.
 - 4. Your schedule will change (and not just once), and your ways of living will change.
 - 5. If you don’t want change and can’t adapt to it, don’t marry. A husband or wife cannot be a pleasant addition.

C. Suggestions.

1. Understand that change can be threatening to people. We get set in our ways (and not just when we're old). Be patient with each other, and provide a base of security for each other within the process of change.
2. Realize that change has to happen and will. Learn to see it as opportunity rather than inconvenience.
3. Don't be afraid of growth in your partner. Support it. Your partner will be grateful, and it will make your marriage more interesting.
4. Pray for what is best for your partner (without deciding on your own what that is).
5. Trust God to lead the two of you forward together.
6. Remember, when you stop growing (and growth requires change), you are ready to die.

Some specific issues to talk through:

I. **Money.**

- A. The biggest source of marital disagreement and trouble, and the number one cause of divorce.
- B. Who will handle it and how?
- C. Will financial responsibility (and knowledge) be shared so both partners know what is going on?
- D. What is the basic attitude of each toward money, and how can the two be made compatible?
- E. Is either person a financial disaster looking for places to happen?
- F. Is either a tightwad? Why?

II. **Sex.**

- A. Needs, fears, expectations, experiences, turn-offs, turn-ons. This is a area of married life in which shaming has no place but is a great threat to love because sex, by its nature, makes people vulnerable to each other. Respect is crucial.
- B. Honesty is crucial, also, as long as honesty comes from a base of respect and empathy. If disgust enters the picture, it needs to be disgust at something distinct from the other person. “I’m not comfortable with that,” rather than somehow communicating, “You’re disgusting for even suggesting that.”
- C. Birth control (what kind, who uses it and assumes responsibility for it).
- D. Look again at communication myths: “If he/she really loved me, he/she would know without having to be told” Lovers are not mind readers. Postponing honest communication about likes and dislikes only increases the possibility for shame later. “I feel awful. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”
- E. Former partners. Honesty and tell-all are not the same. Speak for the other’s sake, not your own, and be careful what pictures you put into your spouse’s mind.
- F. Keep sex within the context of love, mutual respect, and compassion, realizing sex is much bigger than the bedroom. Thoughtlessness in other areas of married life affect sex as much as thoughtlessness in sex itself. Romance is needed in every part of the marriage.

III. **Housing.**

- A. Expectations, immediate and long-range.
- B. Learning the realities, financial and otherwise.
- C. Being realistic. The current crisis shows how dreams exploited turn into disasters.

IV. **Work.**

- A. One or both of you? For how long?
- B. Does one’s career have priority over the other? Why, and how is that priority communicated?
- C. How will you make decisions about transfers, job loss, opportunities—all the various matters of job change?

- D. Who makes more, and does it matter to you—not “should it” but “does it”?
- E. Are you competitive with each other?
- F. Does one appreciate, respect, and care about the other’s work and career?

V. **Sharing responsibilities at home.**

- A. Traditional (“man’s work” and “woman’s work”) or freer and willingly shared?
- B. Shared in what ways? Who’s in charge of this and that?
- C. People who are valued and respected on their jobs don’t want to be treated as servants at home. It can be a problem if someone accustomed to making his/her own decisions suddenly is expected to take orders and measure up to the other’s standards for work done.

VI. **Children.**

- A. Yes or no?
- B. How many (and who decides)?
- C. Don’t even think about putting off these first two question until after you’re married (or being less than truthful about your feelings and desires).
 - 1. You cannot both have children and not have them.
 - 2. Don’t hope to change your partner’s mind later.
- D. Raising and disciplining the children you have. This is the second biggest source of marital disagreement and trouble.
- E. See again the section on change. Children change your life.
 - 1. Some people can’t imagine life and marriage without them.
 - 2. Some can’t handle either life or marriage with them.
- F. Realize that, no matter what you decide, having children or more children may remain a possibility.

VII. Friends.

- A. Any problems with his or hers?
- B. The need for friends. Few, many, or none?
- C. Beware of toxic friends.
- D. Beware (!) of a partner who wants you to have no friends or tries to isolate you.
 - 1. Watch out for the jealous partner who is dangerously insecure or controlling.
 - 2. Run from the “I’m all you need” person.

VIII. Faith and religion.

- A. Attitudes, importance to you and your partner, and way they function in your partner’s life.
- B. Conflicts?
- C. Faith/religion can be a great source of strength for a marriage, or a great source of discord.

IX. Larger families, his and hers.

- A. Relations and expectations.
- B. Handling the holidays.
- C. Strength of their presence in your marriage (literal and emotional).
- D. Down the road, you’ll have to deal with your parents’ aging.
- E. Relations with siblings and others in the extended families.
- F. Pressures.
- G. Sources of support and comfort.
- H. Attitudes toward you and your spouse.

X. **Hopes and dreams.**

- A. Do you talk about them and share them?
- B. They change and, sometimes, seem to get lost.
- C. We need them, and sometimes we have to find them anew.

XI. **Leisure and fun.**

- A. Traveler or stay-at-home?
- B. Sit home or go out?
- C. Fun things together.
- D. Fun things separately with or without other friends.
- E. Relative need for fun vs. time spent working.

XII. **Pet peeves** — we all have them.

- A. They may seem silly (“How can you hang the toilet paper that way?”).
- B. But don’t let them get the better of your marriage.
- C. Try not to be over-sensitive.
- D. Allergies and phobias are not just peeves.

XIII. **Prejudices and values.**

- A. Any conflicts?
- B. Openness and flexibility? Can you discuss values and prejudices, or are some subjects considered absolutely settled and unquestionable?
- C. Beliefs, values, moral positions, sense of honor, convictions. And the strength or intensity with which they are held.
- D. Bigotry.

XIV. Time together and time apart.

- A. Balancing your needs for each.
- B. Avoiding jealousy, possessiveness, and over-dependence.
- C. Enjoying each other without losing yourself.

XV. Personal habits.

- A. Morning person? Night owl?
- B. Alcohol or drug use or dependency.
- C. Cleanliness.
- D. Punctuality.
- E. Orderliness.
- F. Reliability.
- G. Procrastination or follow-through.
- H. Minor irritations (slurping coffee, leaving clothes on floor, etc.)

XVI. Dealing with the past and with things we “carry.”

- A. We all carry baggage from the past, some extremely serious, some mildly significant.
- B. Former marriages or loves.
- C. Abuse or neglect during childhood.
- D. Mistakes or worse.
- E. Criminal records.
- F. Fixations, compulsions, fears, self-doubts, etc. Mental/emotional disorders.
- G. We don't need to make dealing with the past into a career, but some things don't go away just because they are denied attention.