

Preparing for Marriage

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10 Tools for the Journey

by William Urbine

Marriage is a big issue in our culture today. There are widespread and varying reports of divorce statistics. The Barna Group, which studies religious groups, says that about three fourths of married Catholics stay married, and that about a fourth have been divorced.

Indeed, how couples learn to dialogue and relate is what marriage is all about—from its romantic beginnings to its difficult ending, when a spouse passes away.

We all know that as an engaged couple prepares to approach the altar, they bring with them all the hopes, dreams, common sense, intelligence, courage, confidence, and goodwill that brought them together in the first place. But, in almost all cases, they also bring some baggage that will be a factor throughout their lives. In this *Update*, we'll take a look at some of the big issues that any couple considering marriage should be thinking about.

Good marriage preparation challenges couples to begin looking at and exploring together the feelings, values, and ideas they cherish. These will shape the way they make lifetime decisions. A lifetime of love will continue to uncover the good and raw stuff of a man and woman's characters. Yet, we know a lot in advance about what makes marriages work.

Couples can better prepare themselves for the changes in marriage by looking hard and honestly at a number of key issues. In what follows, I offer ten areas about which the happiest couples communicate often. The first one, of course, is the most obvious.

1 Work on good communication.

Ask any married couple. They'll tell you how making a real effort to talk about and work through everyday concerns is crucial to their stability and sanity. It also builds the trust, courage, and skills that ground the spirit of love. It's challenging some days to convince ourselves that we have these skills.

Being able to talk over everything with your spouse (or future spouse) makes for a vital relationship. It doesn't matter whether the subject matter is a concern about how a family member really upsets you or even if it is about that annoying mannerism of your fiancée. By talking it out regularly, and patiently, you develop skills and trust to tackle more major issues that may arise.

Often our nonverbal cues (our "body language" and voice tone) tell each other the real story about our mood. Sometimes a spouse may have trouble letting you finish a sentence. Learn how to read each other's nonverbals. On the other hand, when you need to talk, make sure that you tell your spouse. He or she can't just guess when you need to talk.

If there is too much conflict, or if you go wildly out of control when you talk to your future spouse, perhaps it might be time to seek help from a member of the clergy or a therapist to discuss your concerns.

2 Learn how to fight fair.

Do you as a couple resolve issues well? Most married couples have a few standard ongoing fights—perhaps five or so themes. They might include children, sex (or the lack of it), finances, in-laws, and hurt feelings. Every couple's list might be slightly different, yet there are some similarities as well. Perhaps you have already figured out what five fights you will have over the lifetime of a marriage. Jot them down—on the margin right here. Now, try to figure out what you can do differently in your responses to help things go more constructively.

Have you already found out that your future spouse is a night owl and you are an early morning lark? Or vice versa? This difference can even affect your ability to have a good spirited discussion.

Figuring out the best time of the day to talk is very helpful. If a heated conflict should happen during the day, it is also important that you have agreed in principle (*and* in practice) not to go to bed before resolving the concern.

3 Be prepared to accept change.

It's a mantra in our society: life sweeps past you, changing all the time. If you want the job, you might have to learn new technology. Marriage is similar. Talking with a fifty-year-married couple will convince you of this. The average age for marrying in our society is around twenty-eight, so there is a lot of time for surprise and change for married couples.

Openness to trying out new things is important. It can range from going out to a new restaurant to switching parenting roles. Watching people grow in a relationship can be exciting. You've already changed some because of this new relationship.

Sometimes changes are beyond our control. We don't ask for them. Perhaps it is a job loss with a required relocation to a new town or maybe a child with disabilities demands your undivided attention. We might also be overwhelmed by our work, a new career, or the changes in roles in our relationships. Whatever these changes are, coping with them well is important. Seeking feedback from family and friends on how you're handling change can help.

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