

Marriage -- A Many-Splendored, Sometimes Splintered, Thing

Daniel Wayne Matthews, Ph.D.

Marriage is still the prominent partnered relationship in the American culture as evidenced by the 2.3 million marriages recorded in 1992. This holds true despite the high number of divorces, 1.2 million in 1992, and the negative stereotypes of marriage portrayed in movies and on television. Although one of every two new marriages end in divorce, many couples feel the ideal situation is one man and one woman committed to a life-long marital relationship. And many such couples sincerely vow to remain in their marriage "til death do us part."

A number of stumbling blocks inevitably arise to challenge the couple's best intentions. For example, young couples often fail 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 year after year, disappointment is likely to come sooner or later. Conflict, crises, and daily hassles are part of virtually every marriage relationship.

Discussing important issues like money, children, role expectations, sex, and in-laws before marriage will help set the stage for a smoother relationship. The single most accurate word to describe what happens in a new marriage is "change." Anything which can be done to help prepare for the inevitable changes of marriage is a good investment in the relationship.

Adapting to Change

Change produces stress. When confronted with change of any kind we are required to adapt to that change in some way. Although a lot of changes involved in getting married are seen as positive changes, they still produce stress. To build an effective relationship we must learn how to adapt to change and cope with 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 which most couples will have to face include:

- *Change in lifestyle.* Newlyweds may not be able to have the same level of prosperity in their marriage that they enjoyed while living with their family of origin. It is very possible that the couple will have to struggle and gradually work their way up to a standard of living that is satisfactory to both persons. More than likely that is exactly what their parent/s had to do.
- *Change in location.* Today's couples are highly mobile. There is the possibility that jobs for either you or your spouse will require that you move away from your hometown and away from where your family lives. 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 stay in your present location or move away, there is a good chance that you will lose contact with many of your old friends. Getting married changes your social status. You will probably get acquainted and make friends with other married couples, rather than socialize with your single friends as much. Also, you and your spouse may have had a different circle of friends prior to getting married and neither of you feels close to the other's friends.
- *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. They may involve things as simple as where you squeeze the toothpaste tube, rinsing the tub after your shower, or whether to fold underwear before putting it in the drawer. Or they may involve things of greater importance to you, such as birthday or anniversary celebrations. For example, you may enjoy lavish parties while your spouse thinks a card and a pizza will suffice.
- *Differences of opinion.* No matter how much alike you think you and your spouse are, you won't always see eye to eye on every subject or issue. You may have different opinions on things which directly affect your family, such as child-rearing, money management, or religious preference. Or you may have separate views on politics and world events. Having differences of opinion doesn't make either of you wrong, just different.
- *Change in attitude.* After you are married, you or your spouse may experience some attitude 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 things about your spouse may also seem less than ideal after a while.

- *Changes in personality.* Many of the changes in your new spouse's personality may be more perceived than real. You may only be able to see the real personality after you are married. Prior to marriage, each of you may have worked really hard at impressing the other, including pretending to be something you're not. After getting married, many couples think they can "let their hair down" and stop pretending. It appears to be an abrupt personality change.
- *Change in appearance.* Sometimes a partner looks different from what you are used to seeing. Before marriage, your spouse may have always been neat, clean, and well-groomed. As a married couple, however, you see each other under every conceivable circumstance and the appearance will sometimes be sloppy. Changes in appearance will occur as you age, especially if you have 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 between herself and her husband. The man, however, may be somewhat traditional and may see cooking and cleaning as his wife's responsibility. Role expectations are not as clear cut in the 1990's as they once were. Each couple would be wise to communicate honestly about marital expectations before the wedding takes place.
- *Having children.* The choice of whether to have children also is an important decision which needs to be carefully discussed prior to entering 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 strongly 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 relationships experience peaks and valleys. Sometimes, the realities of married life will often cloud over 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. A person's sense of happiness must come from deep inside himself. 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, she does not have the ability to read her partner's mind. Needs for security, affection, emotional support, encouragement, or physical assistance often must be verbalized in clear language, sometimes repeatedly. If the need is something the spouse can realistically provide, she must first know the need exists.

MYTH: *Conflict means a lack of love.*

REALITY: Conflict is inevitable, but it doesn't have to be damaging 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 each partner and to the relationship.

Finances

Few couples, especially in the early years of marriage, are independently wealthy. That means a lot of decisions must be made in relationship to money. Some potentially volatile questions pertaining to a couple's finances include:

1. Who earns the money, one or both?
2. How will the money be spent?
3. Who will manage the checkbook?
4. What is each person's attitude about credit spending?
5. How much should be saved?
6. Should the couple buy a house, or rent?
7. What is communal property and what belongs to each?

These questions 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 prior to marriage, and continually during the marriage.

Sexual Adjustment

Sexual attraction plays a major part in bringing two people together and leading to 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, a 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, meaning that conflict or intense concern over money, for example, can detract from sexual interest.
- Each partner may have different ideas about what is "right" and what is "wrong" in sex life. In reality, there are no "rights" or "wrongs" in sexual activity between a couple, except what each may believe to be acceptable or unacceptable behavior. Personal beliefs should be honored and respected.
- As is mutually agreeable between the two partners, 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 portrayed in the media, movies, or television. Only you and your partner can decide what is acceptable and satisfying for the two of you. Don't try to fit your relationship into someone else's idea of what is "normal" sexual behavior.
- Continue to learn more about your partner than about specific sex techniques. Maleness and femaleness is mysterious; try to be open to learn about that mystery.
- Some make sex a weapon in dealing with other conflicts in their relationship. Doing so magnifies the original problem, and can lead to sexual problems as well.

As with other issues in the marriage partnership, a satisfying sex life depends a great deal on open channels of communication. Try to deal with conflict situations as they arise, so they won't have an adverse effect on your sexual relationship. It is difficult to be romantic or sexually responsive when other conflictual issues are pending. Don't be afraid to discuss your sex life with your partner. Share with him or her 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 other than the husband-wife union. A person entering marriage automatically gains a father-in-law, a mother-in-law, sisters- or brothers-in-law, plus a variety of extended family members related to your new spouse. Although you don't technically marry the whole family, your relationship to your spouse may be largely affected by how well you get along with his/her family. Realistically, it is important to remember that your spouse will likely reflect the values, attitudes, personality, and behaviors which you observe in his/her parent and grandparent generations.

Helpful hints for a positive relationship with your new family might 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 support when you have conflict with 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 and affection.
- Treat both families equally and fairly.
- As a couple, try to establish as much independence from both families as possible. For example, it may create conflict to borrow money from in-laws.

Conclusion

The ideas explored and the suggestions made above set the stage for opening couple 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.

References

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Author

Daniel Wayne Matthews, Ph.D., Human Development Specialist, Family and Consumer Sciences, North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, North Carolina State University.