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After You Say “I Do”: Adjusting to Marriage

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Who is this person I married? Who am I becoming in this relationship? Is marriage supposed to be this hard? If you find yourself asking these questions, you're not alone. All married couples go through periods of adjustment. Adjusting to marriage involves uniting two sets of perceptions, expectations, needs, goals, and personalities.

The Honeymoon Is Over, Now What?

During the first three years of marriage, there are some general patterns of adjustment. The first six months of marriage, considered the “honeymoon phase,” are characterized by few serious problems and a general sense of satisfaction. At about six to twelve months, however, optimism fades into realism due to differences of opinion, financial obligations, bad habits, or boredom.

From about 12 to 36 months of marriage, there may be a short period of disillusionment when your “knight in shining armor” seems to have lost his shine or your “maiden fair” has been less than fair. Challenges for time or money, childbearing, or sexual adjustment require new coping strategies. Children can further complicate the adjustment process. During months 18 to 36, couples begin to get accustomed to life together. Often times, couples who cannot accept or improve their quality of life together break up. Those couples who remain committed to

building a strong marriage have a realistic view of what it takes to be successful.

Components of a Strong and Satisfying Marriage

Strong marriages are the result of efforts by both spouses to make the marriage work. Information gathered from spouses who had been married at least forty-five years revealed six keys to a successful, long-term marriage:

- ✓ Consider mate as best friend
- ✓ Like mate as a person
- ✓ See marriage as a long-term commitment
- ✓ See marriage as a sacred institution
- ✓ Agree on goals
- ✓ Laugh together frequently

Couple relationships that survive and continue to deepen are generally happy, always adjusting, and always under construction. Marriage has both highs and lows, and accepting this as “normal” will help the couple have more realistic expectations.

A strong partnership provides companionship, interpersonal closeness, emotional fulfillment, and support that acts as a buffer against physical and emotional affliction. Marriage should enrich the love between two people, and it evolves through the foundations of friendship, a meaningful sexual relationship, mutual respect, trust, and compassion.

Strategies for Building a Strong Marriage

Strong marriages do not happen quickly or easily. Building a strong marriage takes time, effort, and commitment. One of the most prolific and respected researchers and writers on marital relationships, John Gottman, found that there are different styles of partnerships and relationships—some which were more validating and some which were more volatile. Regardless of the type of relationship, however, he found that the most important aspect of two people staying together is the balance of positive to negative feelings and actions each has towards the other. In his in-depth research and observation, he found what he believes is the magic ratio of 5 to 1, that is 5 positive actions for every 1 negative. The ways you can show these positive actions do not have to be huge displays of affection or extravagant gifts. Positive actions include:

- **Show interest.** This can be as subtle as listening and looking a person in the eye when they are speaking.
 - **Be affectionate.** This can be shown through little acts of physical affection, or as simple as reminding your partner of a happy time the two of you shared together.
 - **Show you care.** Small acts of thoughtfulness and kindness can go a long way in a partnership.
 - **Be appreciative.** Every time you express appreciation for your partner and the ways they contribute to your marriage, you are strengthening the bond between you two.
 - **Show your concern.** When your partner expresses sadness or adversity, it is important that he or she feel validated for their concerns.
 - **Be empathetic.** Trying to share in your partner's emotions can help put the two of you on the same page. This can be expressed through words or through a simple facial expression.
 - **Be accepting.** Even if you do not agree with what your partner is saying, it's important to let him or her know that you still respect them and validate their feelings.
 - **Joke around.** Sharing mutual jokes and laughter can strengthen the ties of a relationship.
- **Share your joy.** Just as it is important to share when you are feeling concerned or sad, it is also positive to let your partner know when you are happy or having a good time.

Over all, two of the most important foundations for any marriage are **love** and **respect**. These two aspects of marriage and commitment underlie many of the interactions that two people share.

The Warning Signs

In his research, Gottman has found that there are four warning signs that when not balanced with positive actions almost certainly lead to the couple breaking up. In fact, they are so harmful that Gottman calls these the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

1. **Criticism**—Often this can start out as complaining. There are always things that can annoy us about our partners. However, when it moves into criticism there can be real problems in the marriage. "Criticism involves attacking someone's personality or character—rather than a specific behavior—usually with blame." Criticism tends to be generalizations rather than about a specific issue. This one can often sneak into relationships because moving from airing a complaint—which is very healthy—can often be confused or turned into a criticism.
2. **Contempt**—Over time, if partners are not careful, criticism can often move into contempt. This is when there is intention to insult and psychologically abuse your partner. Bringing these on are often extremely negative thoughts or feelings about your partner such as he or she is so stupid, disgusting, incompetent, etc. As this happens it is often hard to be affectionate or loving to one another and it can sometimes be hard to imagine why you fell in love with your partner in the first place.
3. **Defensiveness**—Often defensiveness comes in reaction to contempt. It can become automatic to defend yourself when you feel you are being attacked. Defensiveness can be actions such as denying responsibility, making excuses, turning a complaint or criticism around on the other partner, cross-complaining or returning a

complaint from your partner with a complaint of your own. All of these are in contradiction to listening to the partner's complaint, and trying to internalize it and change that behavior. In an attempt of self-protection, the problem is never really resolved.

4. **Stonewalling**—This can sometimes follow many painful interactions of contempt and defensiveness. If the couple cannot progress in their problems toward solutions, often one of the partners (men are more likely) begins to stonewall in conversations. This means that he or she doesn't react when the other partner is mad at them. They ignore the situation or turn into a "stone wall." They either emotionally or sometimes physically leave the conversation or the room.

Any of the behaviors may happen occasionally in a relationship, but the key to watch for is if these behaviors become habitual or routine in conversations and interactions. It is hard to accept criticism or to change behaviors, so it is easy to see how a couple can slide down this path sometimes without really realizing it.

Remember that a happy, healthy marriage takes the commitment of both spouses. Change and growth are part of a healthy marriage. Always search for

additional ways to renew and enrich your relationship—your marriage depends on it!

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