

First Comes Love, Then Comes Marriage...Right? (How Do We Know If We're Ready?)

How do you know if you're ready for marriage?

There is some real wisdom behind that childhood rhyme, "First comes love, then comes marriage." But how do you know if you are ready? Marriage is a major life decision and with a national divorce rate hovering around 50%, many people are fearful about this choice. Although no one can tell you if you're ready to get married, there are three important things to think about that can help you make this decision.

Understand what marriage is really about

The keys to a successful marriage aren't a mystery. Successful marriages are full of love, trust, mutual respect, honesty, and tremendous commitment and dedication to a "we" way of thinking. Successful marriages are not only about how well you, as a couple, handle the hard stuff that will inevitably come your way on a daily basis (finances, chores, communication, in-laws, sexuality, parenting, etc.), but about how well you protect the good stuff too (fun, affection, friendship, etc.) You and your partner were attracted to one another and developed a romantic relationship. Romance is like the starter fluid - it can get a fire burning, but a fire, just like a marriage, needs more than that to grow and sustain itself. To allow your relationship to grow you need to understand each other on an emotional level. Make sure that you and your partner have discussed and come to some agreement about the following issues that are keys to success in marriage:

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- Are we going to have children? If so, how many and who will take care of them?
- Do we agree on how our money will be spent and saved? Do we have mutual financial goals as a couple? Are our individual financial obligations in order?
- Do we agree on how will we divide household chores?
- Do we have a shared view of how spirituality will play a role in our relationship and in the upbringing of our children?
- Are we comfortable discussing our sexual expectations, needs, and fears?

- Do we like and respect each other's friends and family? Is either of us concerned that these relationships will interfere with our marriage?
- Can we communicate well with each other (both through speaking and listening) well?
- Have we been able to successfully resolve most problems that have come our way while we have been dating? Can we talk without fighting most of the time and are we willing to make up after an argument?
- Do we agree on how to spend quality time together having fun and maintaining our friendship? Have we planned how we will make this a priority?

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Examine your motivation to marry

If you are getting married to be free from your parents' control, to cure loneliness, to be happy, to have sex, because you feel social pressure, or for money or security, then you may not be get-

ting married for the right reasons. Marriage isn't a way to live happily ever after or a way for another person to make you feel complete. If you know what you want out of life, you're happy and successful on your own, and you're ready to share your future with another, then you're probably getting married for healthy reasons. Research also shows that if you prepare for marriage by discussing your expectations and vision for the future, you have a better chance of being successful. Discuss with each other why you want to marry, what you hope to achieve as a married couple and what you've experienced by watching friends or family's marriages (or divorces).

Marriage is not for everyone. Talking with friends, family, a faith leader, counselor or marriage educator may help you examine your motivation for marriage. Be honest with yourself and your partner about your goals and expectations. Attend a premarital education workshop to help you explore your feelings and develop skills for communicating your expectations. About 10 percent of couples who do this determine marriage isn't right for them, and that is O.K.

Know your partner well

Truly knowing your partner takes time, shared experiences, and lots of talking. Marriage is very hard to do well, so take the time to make sure your partner is the one you want to invest in for a future. Here are some important things to think about in order to know your partner well:

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- Does my partner share similar life goals and expectations for marriage?
- Does my partner share similar values and morals for behavior?

- Do I feel comfortable with my partner's mental and physical health history?
- Do I feel respected, appreciated, and supported by my partner when we interact?
- Do I feel confident about my partner's commitment to a life-long future together?
- Can I accept my partner for who he/she is today without any hidden agenda to try to change him/her?
- Since the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, is there anything about my partner's past behavior that concerns me? If so, have I been able to talk about these concerns?
- When I marry my partner, I am also marrying into his/her family. Since people often repeat patterns that were practiced in families, have I discussed these patterns with my partner?
- Do our personalities seem to fit together well? Do we have similar emotional styles, energy levels, humor, and education?
- Does my partner exhibit a pattern of emotional stability, reliability and responsibility, and handle changes well?

Marriage is a life-changing decision. And it should be that—a decision, not something you slide into. It's a decision to move toward a shared life with your partner and a willingness to support one another's needs and desires. The more you have identified and worked through as a couple before marriage, the better your

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chances of having a life-long, satisfying relationship. A great way to explore your relationship and readiness is to take a premarital education class. Taking a premarital class together is a good idea because it can reduce your chances of divorce by almost a third.

The marriages that survive over a lifetime often follow a certain path and contain common elements. But in our culture today, we lack what earlier generations took for granted: an optimal sequence for healthy relationships - romance, then marriage, and then children. The great news if you're planning to marry is this. Research shows that people who marry tend to live longer, enjoy higher incomes, have greater personal satisfaction, enjoy better health, and are generally happier than those who are single or living together.

Thanks to Joyce Webb, PhD., a psychologist with 18 years experience working with couples, for her contributions to this tip sheet.

Sources I looked at in addition to my clinical work:

CES Marriage and Couples Education Resources package at www.nnh.org/cyfernet/part1chap2.htm.

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B. D. Whitehead and M. Pearson (2006). Making a love Connection: Teen Relationships, Pregnancy, and Marriage. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

Are You Ready To Get Married? <http://family.findlaw.com/marriage/>.

Sheri and Bob Stritof. Right and Wrong Reasons to Get Married. About.com <http://marriage.about.com/cs/engagement/qt/reasons.htm>.

Sheri & Bob Stritof. Lower Your Odds for Divorce Before You Marry. About.com <http://marriage.about.com/od/engagement/a/mariagelast.htm>

Questions Couples Should Ask (Or Wish they Had) Before Marrying. The New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/17/fashion/weddings/17FIELDBOX.html>.

J. Van Epp (1998). How To Avoid Marrying a Jerk: The Way to Follow Your Heart Without Losing Your Mind. www.nojerks.com.

Smartmarriages.com (resources too numerous to list).

Other resources:

NHMRC website

http://www.smartmarriages.com/directory_browse.html for a directory of marriage education courses.