

# Preparing for Marriage - 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 a wedding 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'd like to offer 10 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 non verbals. 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 with 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 spirited discussion well.

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 50-year-married couple will convince you of this. The average age for marrying in our society is around 26, 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 children with disabilities demanding 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.

### **4. Learn to accept your in-laws.**

Over your lifetime chances are slim that your future spouse's family will move in with you. But their presence is just as real in their influence. They are the people who have shaped and formed the one with whom you will spend your life. Do you like your future in-laws? Can you imagine loving them? How do they compare with your own family? Whether they are quiet or loud, touchy-feely/hugs-and-kisses or more subdued, your future spouse has been strongly shaped by his or her family.

Sometimes your future spouse will have very similar personality traits that you have observed in his or her family members. Can you live with these qualities or traits or do they upset you? When we are deeply in love we can occasionally overlook how strong the past influences of our family can come to be in our relationship. Patience and understanding, as well as honesty, are important.

### **5. Discuss your goals about children.**

Hopefully, by now you have had some conversation about the number of children you want and when you want to start your family. Do you want a large or small family? How do you want to parent these children? If you haven't had this conversation, start talking. What qualities from your future spouse might you want to see in your own children? Children are an exciting part of a marriage, but they are demanding and draining.

You need to decide early, ideally before marriage, how your children will be raised in your religious faith, especially if your partner is of another faith tradition

Perhaps one or both of you bring children to the marriage. How are they adjusting to their future stepparent, and how is your future spouse adjusting to them? Hopefully there is a

comfort level with them and a genuine acceptance on your future spouse's part. It's also consoling to see the grandparents, on both sides, accepting these children.

## **6. Explore together the goals of your journey.**

The fun is in the journey. Your marriage and family life will often take many turns and curves. At times it will feel as if you've been on the biggest roller coaster in the country. This journey of lifetime marriage has no guarantees! The vows we take also include "in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health." Talking about your hopes and dreams as a couple is a vital part of any new relationship. Have you sketched them out on a small napkin, sent them via an e-mail card, or have you sat down and talked, talked, talked? It's surprising what you can learn from talking things over honestly.

A major management guru, Peter Drucker, once posed the question: What do you want to be remembered for? Sharing your answer to this question might help you get a view of the road ahead of you as a married couple. Those lofty goals form a framework where the more practical goals must also be worked out.

Finances are a major sticking point for most couples: Our financial desires are often unstated and a driving force in our individual behavior. Talking frankly and regularly about financial goals is a crucial part of a healthy marriage.

What types of jobs or careers do you all envision for yourselves? Some have dreams of making a lot of money and retiring early; others see themselves working for the sake of work. There are also various approaches to sharing the responsibilities of child-rearing and housekeeping and home maintenance—and these will be deeply important in your marriage. Most people have some assumptions about the "right" answer. Among the many possibilities, it will help to talk about these goals—both lofty and practical—early and often.

## **7. Don't let questionable values shape your marriage**

Today, maybe more than ever, marriage takes an act of faith. Think about the society that you live within. Doom sayers are suggesting that marriage, as an institution, won't be around in 20 years. People of faith, of course, don't buy that! Yet, too many of us have not experienced healthy role models of marriage, whether in our families or beyond.

In your family you may or may not have seen a happy marriage. All of us have said at times that we're going to do it differently from our own parents or siblings' marriages. What's going to make the difference?

Our Church provides us with a vision of marriage that is counter cultural. Our Tradition challenges us to live out a life in a marriage that is permanent, faithful and faith-filled, as well as being open to children and life-giving love. Have you considered using Natural Family Planning rather than other forms of family planning? This approach, sanctioned by the Church, provides a way to cooperate with a woman's natural fertility cycles in order to time pregnancies. (You can find more information from the Couple-to-Couple League, [www.ccli.org](http://www.ccli.org)).

An openness to new life is essential for a Catholic marriage. That should be something which both of you agree upon readily.

## **8. Make your marriage intimate.**

Being intimate—now that can be lots of fun, you say. It's fun to laugh and play together and enjoy each other's company. It's great to be romantic. An increasing number of couples even

opt to dive right into a marriage-like relationship—living together before they're married. If you're cohabiting, are you willing to stop being sexually intimate before marriage as a sign of your true love for each other?

If you're living together now, what will be different after you get married? Will you share your finances together? After you say "I do," what makes you a married couple, not just a couple living together as roommates? Now that's counter cultural!

But there's much more to intimacy than sleeping together. Sharing feelings, conflicts, crisis, faith, beauty of nature, working together, sex and romance, talking about ideas that matter to us, the many ways we have fun together—these all are a part of being married. Each of them provides a path toward intimacy.

Select and discuss with your beloved three forms of intimacy that you see present in your relationship now. Then select three that aren't as important now. Talk about how you can develop these areas in your relationship. Make a plan to act on some of your ideas that you gain from this conversation. Caution: some couples use sex to resolve conflicts, to bypass the *work* of developing friendship. Sexual intimacy can be a wonderful form of communication, but it also can leave problems unresolved.

## **9. Learn to deal with land mines.**

Better safe than sorry! Talking about the past can sometime be difficult. Perhaps prior boyfriends or girlfriends have created problems for you, or there may be unresolved concerns or issues with family members. Stepping around the land mines doesn't mean ignoring the obvious roadblocks in your path—they need to be dealt with at some point.

There might even be some unspoken concerns about past relationships or a previous pregnancy loss. Perhaps friends or family take a higher priority than your relationship. Perhaps a spouse is bringing unresolved debts (college or other loans) into the marriage. It's crucial to get these out on the table and discuss viable solutions that meet both partners' needs.

The possibility of unacknowledged addictions in yourself or your intended is another land mine, unfortunately a common one. If your spouse or intended spouse overindulges in alcohol or uses illegal drugs, start educating yourself on appropriate limits. If either of you has ever been arrested for driving under intoxication, or if someone you are friends with is concerned about excessive drinking, it's wise to make an honest assessment of alcohol use. It's easy to be in denial and not even realize it. What we do know is that if there is a problem today, it won't go away with marriage.

Then there are the lesser-known addictions just as destructive. Too much time on the Internet, too much money spent at the off-track-betting center, an obsession with pornography: All are signs of a problem. More accepted by society is an obsession with work. If any of these things is negatively affecting your time together, you should name the problem and start talking it over. One of you might even need the help of a counselor to help sort things out.

Avoidance and denial of real questions and real issues kills intimacy, trust and goodwill.

## **10. Make God central to your journey.**

The first time you told your future spouse that you loved him or her was wonderful, and also risky. Today, can you tell your future spouse that you love him or her *unconditionally*—without reservation? God's love for us is also unconditional—the example to us of how our love should be.

Indeed, openness to God working in our lives makes all the difference. Acknowledging and sharing that God is in the middle of your lives; guiding you in the big and small changes, *makes* a marriage. Feeling God's presence in your daily lives can be very reassuring. On the other hand, sometimes it is hard to accept that God's ways are not always our ways. In either case, God's grace is a key ingredient in your finding happiness together.

Couples need to find ways to share faith and beliefs with each other, whether or not they follow all the same rituals.

At the beginning it's awesome—willingly and publicly standing up and telling everyone in the congregation on your wedding day that today is only the beginning of a lifetime of loving and that your love is unconditional. Now that's faith, hope and love in action.

But that's only the beginning of your journey along God's way. Expression of your faith will bind you together as disciples journeying together along the way. These expressions can be as simple as praying together before meals or taking time to stand in wonder before God's creation on a walk or on vacation. They can be a routine involvement in the worship and activities of your local parish. Those moments along the way are even more profound in life's "miracle moments" of birth, of sickness and recovery or even of death.

These are the "good times and bad, the sickness and health" that you pledge to each other. In all of those moments, God is with you along the way, awaiting your invitation and openness. Your openness and commitment to each other are indeed signs of God-with-us, the fullness of your marriage sacrament.

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