

The Pre-marital Conversation

Developed by Tamara Ranck for pre-marital classes at The Guidance Center, Southgate, Michigan, 2005.

Contemplating Marriage....

Choosing to marry is a one of the biggest decisions you will make because of the depth and breadth of the consequences of that decision. When asked why people decide to marry the automatic answer is because they love each other. This answer couldn't be better, but is love sustainable and is that the only requirement for a lasting partnership?

If love is your one and only criteria for marriage, can you assume that you won't fall in love again with another? Marriage can't survive without love, but it is not the only ingredient in creating a deeply cherished union between two people. The feeling of love is not a constant or forever, unless it is nourished. Love can fluctuate by mood and circumstance. It can be compared to a perennial flower. It is willing and wants to bloom time and time again, but it needs some basic elements to survive.

Too often we assume a relationship happens by living and doing things together. This is an arrangement rather than a relationship. To have a full and functional relationship we have to be loving and emotionally connected to our partner and that is not always easy. It requires seeing to each other's well being, sometimes at the expense of our own well-being. People who leave a marriage often feel as if they didn't seem to matter to their partner. We all want to be cared about and to be a priority in some else's life. We want to be understood, forgiven, encouraged, appreciated, and cherished by our partner. If each partner isn't willing to make the other the object of their interest, value them, consider them important, be thoughtful, caring and giving, the relationship will be difficult to maintain.

Today marriage is expected to fulfill us in more ways than it needed to yesterday. Years ago, marriage was deemed a success if our physical need of food, clothing and shelter was met and some kindness was expressed between partners in their mutual struggle for survival. Husband and wife were a team, each playing a role and purpose. Today, our physical needs can be met by the individual, it is less necessary to form a team for that purpose. Now, we seek a partner in hopes of emotional fulfillment and intimacy, which is a more complicated and difficult task to ask of a mate in marriage. We do little to prepare or understand all that will be asked of us within the complicated dynamics of marriage.

What is required to make a successful marriage today?

Marriage must work within the two realms of head (liking our partner) and heart (loving our partner).

Love is a feeling and therefore not tangible. It can't be quantified, isn't easily understood and is often described as "chemistry". Initial attraction might be described as infatuation meaning an unexplainable affection for another. What grows that infatuation to an enduring love? When people are asked to describe love they might say that they feel at home with the person, almost that you are seeing yourself in the other person. Another word that frequently is used is "safety". We feel comfortable in being ourselves and supported in our journey in life.

To create an enduring love we simply have to nourish these elements of love.

- It begins with knowing each other well, their thoughts, dreams, hopes, expectations and what drives those feelings.
- Secondly, the relationship needs to meet each other's needs. We need to unselfishly put our partner as a priority in our life.
- Thirdly, trust needs to be established and continually earned.
- Fourthly, intimacy born out of respect and kindness needs to exist and grow.

These elements require an individual's own ability to give and be kind. This ability is aided by emotional intelligence, meaning we know ourselves and others well. It is much easier to teach a tangible skill, say mathematics, than acquire the skills of emotional intelligence. Emotions are elusive, evolving and require a great deal of introspection and energy.

Liking another person or things about another person is easier than loving another person. It doesn't require as much of ourselves. In most cases, "liking" revolves around sharing similar values, interests or sense of fun. A couple needs to have this easy connection with one another because at times, in a marriage, love as glue loses its grip. It is nice to be able to retreat with your partner into a world that is easy and fun where the couple can reconnect. When you like each other you have a rich soil where love can blossom again.

The purpose of this booklet is to help move the couple a little further along the path of soul-searching and sharing so they can nourish the elements of love. In previewing and reviewing the suggested requirements of a successful union, the couple will have a defined and refined vision and expectation of their shared life in marriage.

Marriage requires loving one another

Love satisfies the heart's desires

Element number 1: Knowing one another

“Love is the heart’s immortal thirst to be completely known and all-forgiven” Henry Van Dyke (1852-1933), American poet and writer.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow studied “self actualized people” and described them as having the qualities of; acceptance of self and others, spontaneity, creativity, compassion, inner peace, a healthy sense of humor, the capacity for deep intimacy and exhibit their own unique value system. The most cherished gift a person can give their partner is their help in each other’s quest for authenticity. When we are able to live life according to what we hold dear, life becomes more gratifying.

At times it is scary to look inside of yourself because we are afraid we won’t be able to deal with what we discover. However, knowing and understanding what is in our core provides a centeredness and solace that anchors us when we face difficulties. An individual’s soul is a complex place, but so important to know and reveal to your partner. Our partner needs to know what defines and drives us if we are to share a life. Sharing our thoughts, schemes, fears and unexplainable feelings creates vulnerability but also begins emotional intimacy. Of course, intimacy won’t be established if our partner treats our inner selves disrespectfully, casually or judgmentally.

Exercise;

What is your story? Write down all you know about yourself and share it with your partner. This story is more about the essence of being you rather than just the basics.

Examples of the kinds of questions you will want to ask yourself and know about your partner;

- What makes you laugh and cry?
- What are you passionate about?
- How did your family or any relationship affect your growth?
- What makes you mad?

- What are your spiritual beliefs and how do they affect your daily and life choices?
- What are your defining moments?
- What is important to you?
- How would you define success?
- What makes you feel better when you are sad?
- What are you the most proud of about yourself?
- What do think your strengths and weaknesses are?
- What gives you inner delight?
- Describe a perfect normal and/or special day.
- How do you recharge your emotional batteries?

Element number 2: Giving

Both partners in a relationship have needs and both should work at meeting each other's needs. Hopefully, when we choose to marry we are emotionally healthy and mature. We shouldn't be bringing to the marriage any unresolved conflicts or expecting that marriage will "fix" a perceived inadequacy.

If you or your partner have any problems with violence, alcohol, drugs or mental health be aware that those issues will create emotional demands in a marriage that are very draining. A red flag should be waving in this situation and should be addressed.

Each partner has a responsibility to state their own needs and to work to put their partners needs as a priority in their own life provided it is in a healthy manner.

We stop ourselves for stating our needs for a variety of reasons. We may feel that if our partner really loves us, he/she would be able to figure out what we want (mind reading is beyond most of our capabilities!). We may feel that asking for a need to be fulfilled represents a weakness in oneself or is it selfish. We may simply not know ourselves well and what it is we want. We may feel that it is too much effort to ask, that the receiver won't listen or won't want to respond.

Any relationship, be it a marriage, a friendship, workplace relationships or a business partnership, exists because needs are met for both. The success of that relationship can be measured in how well each is served. This requires a delicate balance. If, one "feeds off" another (requires too much) the partner becomes drained and the relationship weakens. Marriage has to serve two people and the relationship. Each has to give to

the other within a healthy balance and build a sense of togetherness. Some people's neediness is so encompassing it precludes meeting their partner's needs.

Ideally, when you do loving things for one another it is because you sincerely want to, not because you want something for your efforts. "I do for you, you do for me" is a destructive mind-set, we do for each other but not to keep track. When we do receive kindnesses from our partner we need to be grateful and not simply expect them.

Exercise;

To some degree or another most of us have the needs listed below. Give your partner examples how these needs can be satisfied for you. In that process, you can determine the intensity of the needs. If you feel it would be difficult to fulfill your partner's needs as stated, offer an alternative.

Examples of needs;

- The need to feel loved
- The need to feel valued
- The need to be respected
- The need to feel special or unique
- The need to be appreciated
- The need to be admired
- The need to express love physically and sexually
- The need to feel cared for
- The need to feel that you are a priority
- The need to feel safe
- The need to spend time together
- The need to spend time alone
- The need to have fun
- The need to relate to others, socialize
- The need to pursue a professional life
- The need to have financial safety
- The need to be intellectually stimulated
- The need to converse
- The need to be honest and expect honesty
- The need to create a family
- The need to be healthy
- The need to be active
- The need to be creative
- The need to be reflective
- The need to have romance

Element number 3: Trust

Trusting someone means you are able to count on him or her to be honest and faithful. Trust is earned and not automatic. When you trust someone you can fully reveal yourself-your insecurities, weaknesses and failures. Partners should feel safe enough to be their authentic selves. Partners should exercise discretion with their partner's secrets.

- Honesty not only means telling the truth but revealing the truth. Dishonesty in a relationship includes not letting your partner know such things as your activities, your thoughts, your dreams, and your desires.
- Faithfulness not only means sexual fidelity but putting the relationship as a priority in your life. Individual activities are important and healthy but need to be constructive rather than destructive in terms of the relationship.

Exercise:

Describe/write about what honesty and faithfulness look like to you.

Questions to start you thinking:

- Do you expect your partner to tell the other the amount of money spent on a shopping spree or an outing with friends?
- Is what happened or how you felt in a past relationship necessary to be revealed?
- Does flirting constitute infidelity?
- How much free time spent away from one another is acceptable?
- Do you expect your partner to share all their secrets with you, why or why not? What kind of issues would be acceptable to you to keep secret?
- Do expect your partner to share their secrets with another?
- Are friends of the opposite sex acceptable to you and at what level of intensity?
- Is there a difference between a "white lie" and dishonesty?

Element number 4: Intimacy

Once trust is earned and your inner self is revealed, accepted and held dear by your partner you have achieved emotional intimacy. Having emotional intimacy may be described, as feeling “at home” or that you are soul mates. Emotional intimacy provides a safe haven for each other, a great sense of security that binds one to the other.

A natural expression of this emotional intimacy is physical intimacy. Making love is the manifestation of the elements of love. It involves giving yourself to another and trusting someone with your most private self. It is the closest we come to turning a feeling of the heart into something real, something we are literally able to touch. Knowing each other and being emotionally intimate allows the couple to make love rather than have sex. Physical expression can take many forms for many moods so; all physical actions need to be included in this discussion (holding hands, kissing, hugging, intercourse, cuddling, etc). The desire to make love may be influenced by schedules, technique and style or medical concerns but the couple needs to tend this garden of expression, because it is the touchstone of a romantic relationship. If there are problems in the relationship they tend to express themselves in this area.

Exercise;

Write or discuss whether you feel you have achieved emotional intimacy and if it is expressed satisfactorily physically.

Questions to start your thinking;

- Do you feel “at home” with one another, are there times and circumstances that create that feeling more than other times?
- Do you feel comfortable being yourself sexually with your partner?
- When do you feel distance from your partner?
- If not can you accommodate the difference? Do you feel that making love with your partner is a celebration of your togetherness and not just a physical exercise?
- Do feel your levels of desire and interests are similar
- Can you readily express your needs comfortably and safely in lovemaking?

Love will perish over time if the elements of loving are not maintained.

Marriage requires liking one another

Liking satisfies the mind's desires

Element number 1: Tangible points of connection

Differences aren't necessarily bad in a relationship; in fact they can be healthy. **However, if the differences are so immense that to accommodate them it requires compromising the authentic you, then there is a problem.**

Examples of points of connection:

Values

Values are important because they shape our vision of how we expect to live. (See exercises under joint decision-making)

- Social (having friends and relationships with others)
- Monetary
- Spiritual/Philosophical
- Ethics (honesty, timeliness, loyalty, work,)
- Family
- Education
- Health and fitness

Interests

Shared interests provide an easy way to enjoy one another.

- Recreation (fishing, boating, hunting, sports, etc)
- Arts (painting, sculpting, designing, music, theater)
- Hobbies (crafts, card games, gardening)
- Life style (travel, dining/entertaining)

Temperament/Personality

Temperaments don't have to be alike but can cause friction if extremely different.

- Introverted/Extroverted
- Aggressive/Submissive
- Comical/Serious
- Analytical/Creative
- Careful/Risk-Taker
- Easy going/High strung

Exercise:

Having to choose one thing over another requires us to articulate our values and factors in our interests and temperament. Discuss the following hypothetical decisions. Create the conditions for each scenario that would allow you to make a decision of one over the other and then switch your position and state what conditions would be necessary to do so.

- Accepting a work promotion vs. living in a less desirable geographic location
- Quitting a job due to dissatisfaction vs. staying for financial security
- Taking a walk or run together vs. going on a shopping trip
- Going on a recreational trip vs. going to a family reunion
- Paying for your child's education vs. taking a second job
- Having a night out with friends vs. a night with just the two of you
- Purchasing a TV vs. buying season tickets to a sporting event
- Visiting old friends vs. visiting a location you have never been
- Allowing your child to go to the mall vs. helping with chores at home
- Taking a family vacation vs. a vacation just for the two of you
- Attending a friends retirement party vs. attending your child's concert
- Adhering to a budget vs. impulse spending
- Cuddling for the night vs. making love
- Reading a book vs. doing a project around the house
- Having a family member live with you vs. an institutional setting
- Giving money to a charity vs. giving money to a family member
- Spending the holidays with one side of the family vs. the other side

Element number 2: Being Likable

Although your home is a place to "let your hair down" and should allow you to be yourself, it is not an excuse for bad behavior. The person that means the most to you deserves your best manners and common courtesies. You should not save them for the outsiders.

Examples:

- Good grooming

- Listening carefully and without judgment, Stating concerns from your prospective rather than judgmentally
- Using good manners
- Maintaining a level of cleanliness in your environment that suits both

Exercise:

Describe what the above examples looks like to you. What do find particularly annoying and absolutely necessary about daily interactions.

Liking your partner will provide an enjoyable and engaging connection.

Marriage requires joint decision-making

Life offers us multiple decisions on a daily basis. When you marry there is a new dynamic in decision-making. So many of the issues described earlier come into play in this process. Decisions reflect your values, needs or moods. Ideally, both partners can feel comfortable stating their needs and are able to do so in a non-confrontational way. Compromise, kindness, thoughtfulness, good communication skills, speaking from the heart and mannerly negotiations will help in the process of decision-making as a couple.

Key and defining decisions that married couples face include;

Children

Deciding to have children is the biggest decision you will make in your life because it is forever, it can't be changed. You can change your job, your career, where you live, your marriage partner but you can never undo a life you chose to create. Unless death occurs, you will always be their parent.

At the very least, a parent's job is to let their child know that they are loved, even when they make mistakes and are cared for. A parent needs to foster their child's growth towards independence. A child needs to feel trust in another for proper physical, intellectual, social and emotional growth. Parenting requires tremendous patience, self-sacrifice, and time. Having a child can bind a couple together in wonderful ways if their relationship is a healthy and functional one. It can also wear on your relationship since it requires so much of oneself and brings our values to the surface.

Exercise: Discuss

- Describe your desire as to why you want children and how many
- What you expect it will be like to be a parent?
- What do you expect of your partner as a parent and as a supporter to you?
- What accommodations regarding your home, your finances, your careers and your activities are you willing to make for your children?
- What kind of disciplinarian do you think you will be like?
- What values would you expect to model and therefore impart to your children?

- Describe what you would expect a normal day with your children would be like.
- What family traditions do you want to carry on and what new ones do you want to create?
- Tell each other who you admire as a parent and why.

Finances

The subject of money and how it is spent is one that has tested most relationships and severed some. Money provides the ability to survive at the very least and is seen as a mark of success for many. One's identity sometimes is measured in terms of money so it is a hot-button issue.

Exercise: Discuss

- Discuss your desired lifestyle.
- What would your savings plan look like?
- Will you have a budget, how will it be determined?
- Will one partner have more control than the other? Will you have two individual or joint checking accounts?
- What are your spending priorities?
- One partner will probably make more money than the other, does that affect who will choose to spend the money?
- How does each of you create value besides earning income?
- How much do you intend to give to charities?

Spiritual and Philosophical Beliefs

A spiritual life can be so incredibly important to some and not to others, but we all have some form of a philosophy we adhere to and it can dramatically shape your life choices.

Exercise: Discuss

- State your spiritual/philosophical beliefs.
- Share poems, songs, scripture or quotes that are meaningful to you.
- Give examples of how you would expect your beliefs to shape your life choices.
- If there are differences between you how will you be able to support and respect your partners decisions?

Roles and Tasks

Sharing a life requires certain tasks to be accomplished. These tasks can become burdensome when they are added to busy schedules. Couples should work to achieve a balance of work so that one does not feel overly troubled and become a source of complaint between partners.

Exercise: Discuss

Discuss the following tasks and who would you expect to be the lead partner and or how would they be shared.

- Parenting
- Producing revenue; does one person's career take precedence over the others
- Yard work
- Food Preparation
- Cleaning
- Financial issues; paying bills, creating a budget
- Laundry
- Home maintenance

Making decisions jointly requires a delicate balance between what is in each other's best interest. This difficult task is greatly aided with good communication skills.

Choosing to Marry

Becoming a married couple does not mean the work of the relationship is behind you. Falling in love is far easier than staying in love. On a daily basis the couple will have to adjust to some degree the bonds of attachment that bind them.

If you have carefully contemplated the above and have decided to marry then you have decided to make the following commitments:

To commit yourself to meeting your partners needs and seeing to their well-being

To commit yourself to being faithful, honest, trustworthy and to sharing your intimate self

To commit yourself to creating fun with one another

To commit yourself to helping one another live their lives to the values they hold dear

To commit yourself to thoughtful and considerate shared decision-making

To commit yourself to a lifetime of a shared union