



Must Have Conversations

PREPARING FOR YOUR MARRIAGE

Must Have Conversations

As a dating or engaged couple, conversation probably comes easily. The two of you enjoy talking about just anything. Just about anything that is, except ugly disagreements. It doesn't change much in marriage except there are more things to disagree about. You can't run away from prickly conversations – for long. If anything, marriage accentuates the mild differences you have while dating. They can become serious disagreements once the initial excitement of new love becomes the comfort of secure love.

Before you marry, consider “must have conversations” on these topics:

- Spirituality/Faith
- Conflict Resolution Skills
- Finances
- Intimacy/Cohabitation
- Children
- Commitment

You've probably already talked about most of these topics – at least to some degree. Great! That should confirm your decision to marry.

But don't avoid topics that might be sensitive. This is the time to face difficult conversations and make sure you are on the same page. You don't have to agree on everything – just the important things. Use your time of courtship and engagement to explore the serious and controversial issues that are ahead of you. A marriage preparation program will help you to address these issues more thoroughly.

You may come to an impasse on an issue. That doesn't mean you aren't meant for each other. It does mean you should pause and study this issue more carefully. Perhaps it's a sign you need to consult others with experience or expertise in the area.

Must Have Conversations: Faith and Spirituality

Religion can bring spouses together or push them apart.

When couples are on the verge of a major life transition such as marriage, they begin to think about life, love, values...and the future. This is what spirituality is about – our human search for happiness and the meaning of life. Is life just about the here and now? Do morals make any difference? Is death really the end? Is there a reason to live beyond my own comfort? Is that all there is?

Perhaps you're putting off some of these heavy questions for a rainy day when your job is more settled, or wedding pressures subside... or you reach retirement. Whether you address them or not, however, the big life issues will not disappear. They may go underground until a crisis appears – an accident, a child with a serious illness, or a looming divorce. Suddenly, you start wondering what is the rock on which you ground your life. That's the way some people discover their spiritual sides, but you don't have to wait for a crisis. It's so much easier to let faith keep your relationship strong, rather than rescue you in an emergency.

What difference does faith make to a marriage? This time before marriage is an opportunity to take stock of your basic beliefs. Share them with your beloved and chart how you will live out your beliefs and values together.

Does this mean you have to share the same faith? That's nice, but it's more important to talk about what God means to you, what spiritual practices you find meaningful, and how you can support each other once you are married. If only one spouse believes that faith is important, how does he or she stay motivated to attend services if the other is sleeping or recreating? It's not impossible, but it's more supportive to go to services together.

Research conducted by the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University (1999) showed a higher incidence of divorce among interchurch couples (20.3%) than among same-church couples (14.1%). (Interchurch couples are Christians of different denominations, e.g., a Methodist and an Episcopalian, a Presbyterian and a Baptist). Religion can bring spouses together or push them apart. Couples may be of different religions, but that in itself does not predict marital instability. What's important is whether couples engage in joint religious activities. For example, do they pray together or read the Bible together?

Although research finds that greater religious practice is related to lower rates of divorce there is not necessarily a causal relationship. It may be that people who are more actively religious are more likely to oppose divorce, or maybe they work harder at their marital relationship.

Let's say you are both religious, but from different religions. Perhaps you share spirituality but not a church home. Certainly some spouses, strongly committed to their faith, will continue to worship regularly and be active church members, but it's harder to go alone, split financial support, and devote time to two separate congregations.

The solutions to these dilemmas are as unique as the couples who marry. Here are some steps that any couple can take, regardless of faith affiliation.

Talk with each other about important stuff.

Start with the basics:

- Who is God for you?
- What code of ethics guides your life?
- Do you value weekly worship?
- What kind of prayer is comfortable and satisfying to you?
- How important is it that your spouse shares your religious beliefs?
- Are you lukewarm in your religious commitment and likely to fade away if you have to do it alone?

If you've never practiced a religion, consider giving it a try.

Although becoming more spiritual is a value for anyone, styles of worship vary as much as the unique people who are seeking the meaning of life. Try out more than one place of worship. If the first one doesn't fit you, try again. It's worth the effort.

Visit each other's church/synagogue/mosque.

If each of you belongs to a different faith tradition, learn more about the beliefs of that religion. You're not trying to convert the other but to understand what shapes your partner's values.

If you are getting married in a religious ceremony, use this opportunity.

If you are getting married in a religious setting it means that faith is important to at least one of you. Use this opportunity to discuss questions of faith with your spiritual leader. These are the kind of conversations that you may have intended to explore some day, but you've put it off. Now your life is about to change. Use your contact with the priest, minister, rabbi, or imam to go deeper.

Become a grown-up person of faith.

Often people are raised in a religious home. They attend religious education classes, and maybe even a religious schools for 8, 12, or 16 years. But their faith formation got stuck in childhood. If you have grown distant from the faith of your childhood, check it out again on an adult level. If you were a lawyer or doctor you wouldn't think of practicing your profession based on high school information. Update your knowledge of your faith. You don't have to have a degree in theology, but you should not rely on childhood explanations in an adult world.

Make your home a place of unity.

Even if the two of you come from different faith traditions and are committed to continuing them, make your home a place where you merge prayer, rituals, and religious traditions. Since prayer at home is less formal, you can develop creative, inclusive times of prayer and faith devotions together. Experiment with the rituals of each other's faith and blend them to fit your family. The point is not whose church you go to, but rather that you bring it all home.

Don't make children a determining factor.

It's tempting to put off decisions about how you will share your faith (or ignore it) until you have to make decisions concerning the faith life of children. Don't! A child is too important to become a battleground. If faith is important to you, discuss how each of you wants to share your faith with any children you may have before you are married. This question will be part of your marriage preparation. Discussing how you will raise your children can clarify how committed each of you is to your faith and beliefs.

Must Have Conversations: Conflict Resolution

Communication usually comes easily and smoothly to most couples in longer term relationships. They can talk to each other about just anything. It may even be hard to understand how or why married couples fight. You may say to yourselves, “We’ll never be like that.” And maybe you won’t.

On the other hand, you may have already had some quarrels and worry about how to get through these times more smoothly in the future. Wedding planning can bring up all kinds of new areas that spark disagreements. It represents a time of transition in which different opinions and viewpoints more clearly emerge.

What you are experiencing is normal for your relationship stage. The challenge is not to avoid conflict but to learn to use it to clear the air. Through it all, you’ll want to love and respect each other.

Even as two people grow close together, they will occasionally think differently and have different opinions on how to handle a situation. If this doesn’t ever occur, it is likely that one partner is avoiding a confrontation, submerging his/her identity, or always giving in. That’s not healthy for marriage over the long haul.

Must Have Conversations: Finances

Mixing debts and uncertain jobs makes marriage even more fragile.

Perhaps you are approaching marriage on a sound financial footing. You've finished your education, have been employed for several years, maybe have some savings, or own a house. Perhaps you are set – or so you think. But having enough money for a comfortable lifestyle is not all that finances in marriage is about.

It's also about power. It might not seem that way at first. The two of you might have every intention of sharing incomes completely. You certainly don't see each other as people who will dictate how much money can be spent on a cup of coffee. But weird things can happen when money is merged.

Old memories from our family of origin start to replay in our heads. You may agree that it's fine if one spouse makes more money than the other. Then the primary wage earner sees the other spending his or her hard-earned cash on something like a \$50 hair cut or a round of drinks at the club. One person's necessity is another's luxury.

- What if you're not in the enviable position of being financially stable?
- What if one of you still has loans or credit card debt to pay off?

Mixing debts and uncertain jobs makes marriage even more fragile. You will need much self-discipline, however, to keep strained finances from starting quarrels and poisoning your relationship.

Must Have Conversations: Intimacy and Cohabitation

On average, when cohabiting couples marry, they have a 46% higher divorce rate.

As a courting or engaged couple, you have probably discussed where to draw lines about sexual intimacy. The Church teaches that sexual relations are intended by God to express love, commitment, and openness to the blessings of life in the total gift of the spouses to each other.

As you move towards marriage, it's important to make sure that sexual intimacy builds on *other* kinds of intimacy and does not short circuit your knowing each other on many levels.

What are those other levels? John Van Epp, Ph.D. explains in his book, *How To Avoid Marrying a Jerk*, that a healthy sexual relationship comes in stages of bonding:

1. Knowledge of the other beyond the superficial
2. Trust in the other to be a person of integrity
3. Reliability of the other to be a person you can count on
4. Commitment to the other that is not temporary
5. Sexual touch in which you give yourself fully to your beloved.

Van Epp says the order is important. Couples should “never go further in one bonding area than you have gone in the previous.” The risk of disappointment and going beyond your safety zone will not bring you lasting happiness.

Steps leading to sexual intimacy, however, are not the whole of what intimacy is about. Long-married couples know that intimacy includes so much more than just the physical. The emotional intimacy of being able to share your most private and cherished thoughts is a pre-requisite for a fulfilling marriage. Knowing that you can be vulnerable, and your spouse will not use sensitive information to hurt you is another form of intimacy. Realizing that your relationship does not depend on looks, talent, success, or perfection is a kind of intimacy that money cannot buy.

What about couples who live together before marriage? How does this impact a future marriage and ability to be intimate on more than just the sexual level? Given the high divorce rate, it would seem logical to live together before marriage in order to know your partner more fully.

As intuitive as this assumption sounds, current research does not bear it out. Studies (Whitehead and Popenoe, 2002) show that:

- Some in cohabiting relationships (and their children) are more likely to be abused.
- Cohabiting couples have lower levels of happiness and wellbeing compared to married couples.

Why does living together before marriage to prevent divorce end up harming one's marriage?

The answer has to do with the dynamics of commitment. Cohabitation generally means that at least one partner is not ready to commit to a permanent relationship. One or both partners are holding something back. They might be censoring their words and actions to put their best foot forward, lest they lose the relationship. In other words, what you see may not be what you end up getting. Communication may not be completely honest. For example, the couple may avoid sensitive subjects that they fear will disturb the relationship. One partner may give in unduly out of fear that the other will leave.

Another pitfall of cohabitation is “low commitment/high autonomy” relationships. This means that since the couple's commitment to each other is not yet complete, each retains a degree of independence in the relationship. The longer this pattern continues the harder it may be to make the transition to the high commitment needed for marriage.

Does this mean that cohabiting couples are doomed to misery and divorce? Certainly not. But it does give the thoughtful person cause to pause and evaluate. Whitehead and Popenoe recommend the following:

- **Consider not living together at all before marriage.** There is no evidence that cohabitators who eventually marry will have a stronger marriage than those who don't live together. Instead, they may be at greater risk for divorce. Some studies indicate that those who live together with definite plans for marriage are at minimal risk; however, there are no positive effects from cohabiting.
- **Do not make a habit of cohabiting.** Be aware of the dangers of multiple living together experiences. Contrary to popular wisdom, multiple cohabiting experiences do not teach one how to have better relationships.
- **Understand the danger of lengthy cohabitation.** The longer you live together with a partner, the more likely that the low-commitment ethic of cohabitation will take hold, the opposite of what a successful marriage requires.
- **Do not cohabit if children are involved.** Cohabiting parents break up at a much higher rate than married parents. Moreover, children living in cohabiting unions with stepfathers or mothers' boyfriends are at higher risk of sexual abuse and physical violence.

Must Have Conversations: Children

As a couple you may have talked about if you want to start a family and how many children to have. Unless you're entering a stepparent family, however, the nuts and bolts of daily parenting may not be high on your radar screen. Here's a checklist of items that couples should discuss before they get married. See if you've covered most of them.

- Do we both want to have (more) children?
- Do we want to have children right away or wait awhile?
- If there is a good reason to wait, how long might that be? How will we decide when we're ready?
- How many children would we like to have? (It's helpful to have a general idea, if not necessarily a specific number)
- What did you like most about the way you were raised?
- What would you like to change in the way you raise your own children?
- Would we consider becoming foster parents or adopting?
- How do I expect parenting to change our marriage?
- What is the hardest thing I expect to deal with in raising a child?

Must Have Conversations: **Commitment**

Commitment is not a very “sexy” word or concept, but it probably has more to do with making marriages work than anything except common values. It’s not just about reciting marriage vows or having a piece of paper that says “marriage license.” Commitment is important because we act differently when we know that our futures are tied together. You may avoid a prickly conversation if you know the other person will not be around forever. You may move on to another love if your current one has a debilitating accident or simply starts to rub you the wrong way. Commitment means you’ve promised to stay and work it through, not just today but forever.

Must Have Conversations: Conclusions

After you have had a chance to have these conversations, do not hesitate to return to the substance of your discussions at any time. If any of these topics presented difficulty for you, please do not ignore the discomfort or the difficulty. Instead, make note of what you really need to work through and seek out a third party who can help guide you through the conversation. The clergy or other members of your parish community are ready, willing, and able to help you in whatever way they can.

Above all, remember what the marriage instruction in the *Book of Common Prayer* tells us: “Marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, (and) deliberately.” This requires of you a mature attitude that enables you to choose one another in a spirit of freedom, having informed yourselves as well as possible as to what is involved and what will be demanded of you as you live out your lives as a married couple.

There are many other areas ripe for discussion between two persons preparing for this big step in life. These areas, however, are those, at minimum, which must be worked through in mutual respect. Our prayers are with you that the Holy Spirit may give you both courage and wisdom for the days ahead.