

# 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?*

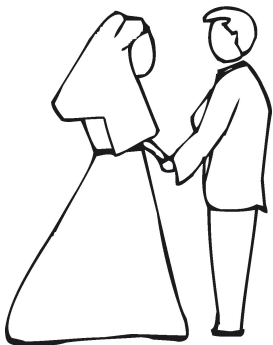
If you find yourself asking these questions, you're not alone. All married couples go through periods of adjustment. Adjusting to marriage involves uniting two sets of perceptions, expectations, needs, goals, and personalities.

## **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," is 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 with time, 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. Couples who cannot accept or improve their quality of life together break up during this time.

Those couples who remain committed to building a strong marriage often 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 your mate to be your best friend
- like your 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 marriage provides companionship, interpersonal closeness, emotional fulfillment, and support that acts as a buffer against physical and emotional affliction. Marriage should enrich the love between a man and woman and evolve through the foundations of friendship, a meaningful sexual relationship, and 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. There are several strategies you can exercise to strengthen your marriage:

### *Commitment*

Commitment brings vitality to the marriage relationship. If either spouse entertains the idea of escaping the marriage through divorce, it creates an instable foundation. Partners cannot grow and experience authentic intimacy with one another if the relationship lacks the security of commitment. Commitment provides a foundation as a couple works through obstacles and trying times.

### *Trust*

The foundations of trust include mutual respect for one another and acceptance of differences. Trust between two people takes time to develop. It is closely tied to integrity. Follow through with what you say you will do. Be the person you claim to be.

### *Communication*

Communication is essential to a satisfying marriage. Learn to share thoughts, feelings, positive feedback, and expressions of appreciation. Self-disclosure can be risky because you make yourself vulnerable, but the rewards are greater than the risks. Set aside some time each day for meaningful conversation. Learn to listen—what is your partner really saying?

### *Conflict*

If conflict is managed in a way that is satisfying to both partners, it can be healthy for a marriage. During conflict, the goal should not be to “win” the argument. Instead, the goal should be to understand your partner’s point of view and be understood by your partner. Remember, you are on the same team. The outcome of resolved conflict may bring a new understanding and more satisfaction to a marriage. Central to resolving conflict is learning to forgive one another.

### *Skills*

Marriage requires maintenance. Just as you frequently provide maintenance on your car, you should frequently provide upkeep on your marital relationship. One way to do this is to increase your relationship

skills. Take the initiative to develop good skills in communication, self-understanding, decision-making, and managing conflict. Develop functional skills such as home repair and money management as well. Participate in educational opportunities from your local county Extension and other community programs. If you prefer self-study, check out your local library resources.

### *Caring*

Part of loving your spouse involves caring for his or her needs. In a marriage relationship, meeting your spouse's needs should be just as important as meeting your own. Ask your partner if his/her needs are being met or what could be different in the relationship to ensure that they are being met.

### *Affection*

Demonstrating affection for one another can positively impact the quality of the marital relationship. It is important that couples discuss with each other their ideas on sexual relations and showing love to one another. What makes one partner feel loved may not be the same for the other partner. It is vital for couples to communicate frequently about affection and intimacy in the relationship.

### *Expectations*

Set realistic expectations. You cannot expect your spouse to provide for every need that you have. Continually readjust your individual and mutual expectations.

### *Priority*

No relationship can grow without time and effort. Be willing to work together to develop a mutually satisfying relationship. Set aside time and money to work on your marriage, whether it involves communicating, taking a vacation, or participating in a marriage enrichment seminar. Balance your time demands so that you give your marriage your best instead of your "left-over" time.

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!