

Pre-Marriage Counseling: A Quick-Study for Young Christian Couples

Introduction

Please note that this is not meant to be an all-encompassing, everything-you-need-is-right-here study. This is just a list of highlights to get couples talking and to encourage and enlighten them on the journey ahead. This should be used as a starting point to discuss the future. Different couples will have different issues and concerns. This is meant to find out what those are and address them now before having to deal with anything in the heat of the moment.

Communicating

Answer the following questions:

- How do you feel you communicate with each other now? Are there any topics you're afraid to bring up?
- Who does the most talking in the relationship? Are both of you okay with this?
- Have you had any disagreements or even arguments yet? How did those arguments end? How were they resolved? Do you both think the argument was fair?

Make Good Habits

The first key to keeping your marriage alive for the duration is communication. Not just with each other, but with God as well. The longer you are in a relationship, the more comfortable you become. Habits form, routine sets in and sometimes communication becomes the exception instead of the norm. It takes a formation of good habits and routine to not let communication fall by the wayside. There are several things you can do to keep communication alive:

- Pray together and regularly
- Plan a date night where you do nothing but talk. No movies, no distractions. Dinner, coffee, or picnics are all good conversation dates.
- Attend church and small groups together. Time apart is a good thing and separate men's nights, or women's events are encouraged, but your marriage should be tended to regularly.
- Build each other up even when you're not with each other. Speaking highly of a spouse around your friends even when that spouse isn't present forms a good habit and a good attitude towards each other.

In the beginning...

Your lives are about to begin the act of co-mingling. Not just dating but sharing *everything*. Furniture, cars, money, bathrooms, maybe even toothbrushes...this is a good thing, but can also take a toll. Don't be afraid to tell each other if you feel intruded upon, if you need space, if you want to share something that might be uncomfortable. It is painful at first to do this, but the long-term benefits are huge and lifelong.

Arguing Fairly

The 'spat' is inevitable. Every couple has disagreements. Learning how to argue is one of the best things a married couple can do to keep their marriage alive. Ask yourselves these questions:

- Have you argued with each other yet? How did it go? Did one of you give in to the other?
- What started the argument? Could it have been avoided?
- What is the angriest you have ever been? Do you think you could be this angry with your spouse?
- When you're angry, what do you need to do to stop being angry? Anger is not necessarily a bad thing. Uncontrolled anger can become an issue.

Being married means you know everything about each other. You know each other's likes and dislikes, what makes them happy...and how to use that information against them. Do NOT fall into this trap. Arguing is a fact of life. Arguing fairly takes practice. This can take some time...some long, painful time, but your marriage will benefit and even strengthen from learning to argue fairly with each other.

As your relationship matures, you will also find yourselves being better able to determine which battles you really want to fight or even avoid arguments altogether. Maybe there are better ways to present your thoughts without putting your partner on the defensive. If you feel the need to offer a criticism, maybe highlight the positives to go along with it.

Outside Help

Marriage counseling is not just for those who want to get married. Sometimes, couples need to communicate with others to work on their own relationships. Don't be afraid to involve a third party if you think it is necessary. Couples getting together to discuss 'married' things can be a great marriage-building tool. And formal counseling is not a bad thing. There are many long-term married couples who have sought counseling to discuss things that may not be communicated well with each other. Seeking counseling is not a defeat, it is a valuable tool that can save a marriage.

There is a danger in seeking outside help that you need to be aware of. Don't go to one of your friends and start bashing your partner. It's okay to discuss needs, frustration, even anger, but don't let it turn into a spouse slamming session where all you do is talk bad about the person you love. This can turn friends against each other and even replace good habits with bad ones.

The Wedding Day

Your marriage may even be put to the test before it begins. Have you ever been involved with planning a wedding before? It can be a trial. One of the key words to remember about your wedding day is 'day'. It is one day out of your life. Yes, it should be special and should be celebrated, but don't put the balance of your marriage on this one day. It may not go perfect. It might rain. The cake may fall. There may be a stain on the wedding dress. The rings might get lost. This is not your marriage. It is one day. Roll with it. If you can't make it through this one day, how do you expect your marriage to last? Plan your wedding together, don't let it cause stress or tension. And always allow room for error. Because there is no such thing as a perfect wedding.

The Long Term Goals

There are many things that you can do as a couple to ensure that your marriage lasts a lifetime. These will take patience and practice but will bring your marriage peace.

God

Your relationship as a Christian should always come first. Period. As a Christian, Love is what makes us who we are. It's what drives us to do better. It's what defines our very lives. As long as both of you are striving towards God, you are striving towards a single, common goal and are going the same direction. You can build each other up, carry each other on the journey, keep each other in focus and on track and share each other's strength and wisdom.

God gave us marriage as an example of how to have a relationship with Him. We experience compromise, unconditional love, and even sacrifice. How we treat each other in a marriage is how we treat God. Answer the below questions:

- How do you argue with God? Do you call God names?
- How much time do you spend with God?
- How do you show God your love?
- How do you talk about God with your friends?
- How much are you willing to compromise to be with God?

Now take those questions and replace the name God with the name of your spouse. Do those answers still apply? Why and why not?

As long as both of you are Christians and treat Christ as the head of your household, your marriage is unshakeable. Make sure that God comes first. Find a church that you both like. Attend small groups regularly. Do bible studies both with each other and separately. Pray together and separately. Keep God first.

Money

When looking up the leading causes for divorce over many decades, money is always in the top two reasons if not the number one reason. It is important to keep money in its proper place. You need money to live. It is a tool that provides housing, food, clothing, utilities and transportation. It provides the ability to have a good time. It provides comfort and luxuries. It can also provide pain, grief and suffering. It can be a doorway that leads you away from friends, family and God.

Be on guard with each other and for each other. There are many ways to protect your marriage from the misuse or desire of money. It is important early on to establish a budget. And it is important to do it together. You both need to come up with a way to afford to live together without straining your bank account. Some couples are content to have separate bank accounts, some combine their resources into a joint account. Some couples divide up utility bills and the responsibility to pay those bills. Some couples have a partner that is strong with money and one that is weak, so the strong one gets majority control. It isn't how you manage money that counts. It's that you both decide how to do it and stick to it that makes the difference.

As Christians, there are many biblical principles for managing money. Pray often and together about your finances. Tithe to your church. Money can be a great thing if it's used correctly and for God.

Ask yourselves these basic questions and see where each of you differ and what you both need to work on:

- Do you currently have a budget? Do you stick to it?
- Do you currently have any debt? What are you doing to pay that down?
- What are your long-term goals with money? Do you have a retirement plan?
- What are your priorities with money? What is the most important thing to you to spend money on?

In-Laws

For some couples, the 'in-laws' can be a tricky subject. For some, it's no big deal. Regardless of how you feel about your in-laws, there are some basics to keep in mind. Your family is just that: family. They raised you, they grew up with you, they ate at the same table with you every night. They know you best of all, better than anyone else. The transition from that to your spouse can be difficult. Not just for you, but for your family, as well. Some family members may see the spouse as butting in on their territory. Some may do it without even realizing it. It is important that you defend each other as husband and wife even to your own family.

Just as your relationship with God comes first, your relationship with your spouse should come before anyone else. You should be devoted to your spouse more than you are devoted to your family. These may seem like harsh words, but they are the truth. If you deny God before anyone else, what have you done? In the same way, what happens if you deny your spouse to someone, even a beloved family member?

The other thing to keep in mind is that your spouse is not a *replacement* for your family. Your spouse should be an *addition* to your family. If you feel a little awkward introducing your spouse to your family, just think how *they* feel. They don't know your family like you do. They don't know the traditions, the long-standing family jokes, they may not even know which spot on the couch is available to them. Make sure your spouse and your family know each other and make the transition on each of them as painless as possible. But make sure that your family knows that your spouse comes first. This is a biblical and Godly principle and is nothing to be afraid of. For some, this transition will be easy and have the full support of each family. For others, this may be more difficult. You are only responsible for each other and your own actions in front of God.

There is an easy trap to fall into that many are not even aware is there until it is too late. If you are ever in a fight with your spouse, do not call your parents and complain about how you're being treated! The first instinct as your parent is to take your side and harbor resentment or even hate for your spouse. This can be the source of so much tension in a marriage and you won't even realize it has happened until it smacks you in the face. Family get-togethers become a dread, holidays are no longer a time of joy, but a time of fear, tension in the air that can cause discomfort for everyone around...and much more if you're not careful. One possible suggestion to avoid this trap depends on your relationship with your in-laws. If you need to talk to someone about your spouse, who better than the family that raised them? Your in-laws know your spouse inside and out. You may be surprised at their reactions if you seek their counsel. Again, this depends on your relationship with your in-laws, but it may not be as far-fetched as you might think.

Children

Remember earlier when it was said that God comes first, and your spouse comes before everyone else? That still applies here. Your children will be a gift from God. The way you love, nurture and raise them will influence them the rest of their lives. That includes your relationship with your spouse.

Just like your relationship with God should be an example of how to treat your spouse, your relationship with your spouse should be an example to your children. If you want the best life for your children, this includes showing them what kind of spouse to be. The character and qualities that your children look for in a future spouse will be the example you set for them from day one. Do NOT put your children before your spouse. That can set your children up for failure later in life.

As wonderful as having kids can be, it is also a chore. Do not let your kids overtake your time with your spouse. Your kids are with you for the duration of their childhood. Your spouse is with you for the rest of your life. Make sure you have alone time with each other. This can be difficult but should be done to keep your marriage healthy. Make every effort to be a loving married couple, especially when you have children.

And don't be afraid to argue in front of your children as long as you argue fairly. Your life is an example for your children. If you don't teach them how to argue, where else will they learn it? It is important that you learn how to handle disputes and disagreements early on so that you can pass that knowledge and wisdom on to your children.

Back to Basics

Having a relationship is easy. Making a relationship that is healthy, strong and enduring takes work. These are some basic principles to make your relationship stand the test of time.

Responsibilities

Sharing your life with each other means sharing your joys, your friendship, your love, your material things...and your chores. It is best to split up the daily routine things with each other early in your marriage, so it doesn't become a sore point later on. Is only one of you working? Well, all of the household chores should fall on one person, right? Not always the case. Make sure you don't burn each other out by falling into this trap. If you're both working, who gets which duties? How often? How much time should be devoted to chores?

It doesn't matter who gets what daily responsibilities as long as you both agree to it. Sit down, talk with each other, make a list of household chores and divide them up the way you see fit. You can divide them up by category (one gets laundry, one gets dishes), by schedule (this week is laundry, next week is dishes) or however you choose. It's not about how it gets done. It's about getting it done fairly.

Another pitfall that daily chores can cause is the way those tasks are performed. A good rule to keep is if your spouse completes a chore, do not criticize the way it is done. If you don't like the way they're doing it, do it yourself! Otherwise be grateful that the chore is done, and you didn't have to do it. This rule can save you time and energy in arguments.

Time

So many couples turn their marriage relationship into a mundane routine. Their love and intimacy slip away from each other and before you know it, you're just roommates. Plan ahead so that this doesn't happen to you.

- Plan a regular date that does not get broken. Once a week, once a month, whatever. Put it on your calendar and block out that time like you would for a doctor's appointment. It can be a movie, a concert, a game night with friends, a picnic...just do something! Rescheduling is okay, cancelling is not.
- Talk to each other! This goes back to that communication thing. Make sure you keep talking. Whatever it takes.
- Find a hobby that you can do together. Do you both like car shows? Maybe a book club. How about hiking? Find something that you both like to do together and do it.
- Make time for your spouse and for God. Set aside time to share God together and to spend time with God alone. Your relationship with your spouse, your family and with everyone else will flourish because of it.

The Little Things

Your pre-marriage relationship is so much fun. Unexpected gifts or flowers, little surprises, love notes in unexpected places...well, that's all gone once you get married. Or is it? It's important to keep those little things alive in your marriage. Maybe even more important than it is during your dating relationship. Is she having a bad day? Pick up some flowers on the way home. Is he having a rough week at work? Maybe it's time to go out to dinner together to get his mind off things. Is she feeling burdened by something? How about doing her chores for her so she doesn't have to worry about that one-more-thing-to-do. Is he worried about finances? Leave a love note in his car to find later.

Even better...do those things for no reason. Those little displays of love go a long way in a relationship. Even if you have to set reminders or schedule them in your own personal calendar to get them done, do so.

Do NOT forget to compliment each other. Did she put on a nice-looking dress? Tell her so. Did he do a good job with something? Let him know. Say 'thank you', 'you're wonderful' and 'I love you' regularly.

Remember Why You're Married

There are going to be days when you wake up and think, "Why is this person next to me? What did I get myself into?" It's going to happen, but don't let it ruin your relationship. It is important to remember why you love that person and why you married them in the first place. The feeling of love is wonderful and overwhelming, but also can be fleeting. True love takes work and practice and effort. You will not always feel in love with your spouse. It is important to love them anyway.

Sex

Finally! You are a young Christian couple who are married! All that stigma is gone, all of those rules about sex before marriage are a thing of the past. Sex is on the table. In fact, have sex on the table! I'm just kidding of course, but think for a second...did that joke make you nervous or uncomfortable? It shouldn't. Not once you're married, anyway. Sex is a wonderful thing. It's the best way a couple can show intimacy and love. There is no reason for a married couple to maintain that stigma anymore. Feel free to explore and take pleasure in it as you see fit. As long as you both agree and enjoy, do it! It is a gift from God and should be accepted as such.

Just as with anything else in your relationship, there are going to be issues to deal with. First, don't use sex as a reward or a bribe. It belittles the act of sex and puts a price on it instead of being an act of love.

Second, don't withhold sex out of anger or spite. Intimacy may be the last thing you want when you're angry with your spouse, but once the dust settles and the steam has blown off, you may find that sex is a great healer of wounds. Third, keep each other interested. Don't expect sex just because you're married. You shouldn't have to earn sex, but you shouldn't let it become an expected routine either. Treat each other like you are still in your first year of marriage and your sex life will last and improve with age.

The only thing to keep in check is your conversations about sex with your unmarried friends. Sex is wonderful and beautiful, but it is a huge temptation. If you do end up in a conversation like that, emphasize how important it is to be done right in the eyes of God. With that one exception, everything else is...well, on the table. Enjoy!

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