

Preparing for Marriage – Before you say “I Do”

By Clyde M. Narramore, Ed.D. and Bruce Narramore, Ph.D.

It was a beautiful wedding – almost perfect. With gorgeous weather, an attractively decorated church, and heavenly music, the ceremony flowed smoothly. Megan, the bride, turned to her mother, and beamed, "Mom, wasn't it just wonderful?" And Mom agreed.

But as the weeks and months passed by, Megan began to realize that while her wedding was perfect, her marriage wasn't! In fact, she wondered why she and Brandon hadn't seen some of their problems coming long before they decided to marry.

We are always interested in how married people respond to the question, "How long after you married did you realize that you were going to have serious problems?" To our surprise many say, "On our wedding day!" We remember Heather, a woman in her thirties, saying, "As I was walking down the aisle, I realized we shouldn't be getting married. I knew I wasn't ready and I kept praying to God that when the pastor asked if there was anyone who had an objection, someone would stand up and say so. But no one did. So I went through with it, hoping things would get better. But they didn't. They became worse! Finally we divorced."

When Clyde asked 26-year-old Keith how long it took after the wedding to understand that he and his wife were in for some difficult days, Keith told him it was on the second day of the honeymoon.

"We were in our room in a nice hotel," he said. "I looked up in time to see my bride throwing a flower vase at me. Fortunately, she was a bad shot! The vase missed my head, but it knocked out the window. I was stunned and asked, "What's wrong?" She told me I would never know. That's been 18 years ago and I still don't know why she threw the vase, let alone why she is upset with me about so many other things. And believe me, it's rough."

We don't know if Keith is so clueless that he doesn't realize the upsetting things he does to trigger his wife's anger, or if she is incredibly over-sensitive and easily hurt. But in either case, they could have avoided much grief if they had worked out their problems before they married.

There's an old saying, "Marriage is a school in which the pupil learns **too** late." If we aren't ready for marriage, or we choose a poor marriage partner, this can be very true. Yet, for most people it doesn't have to be. To be sure that it isn't, we need to do three things. First, each person needs to be prepared to be a reasonably mature, emotionally healthy, and spiritually committed spouse. Second, one needs to select a mate who is ready to be a reasonably mature, emotionally healthy, and spiritually committed spouse. And third, each person needs to be willing to face his or her needs to grow and become a better person and well-adjusted marriage partner.

In this booklet, we will look at eight areas that will critically impact your marriage. These eight areas can provide helpful guidance in determining whether you and your prospective mate are ready to make a lasting, lifetime commitment.

1. Personality Adjustment

Some people are quite well-adjusted while others are not. The person who is lacking in good emotional or personality adjustment finds it difficult to live with self and others. Most serious marriage problems arise because one or both partners have some longstanding, problematic personality characteristics. Once married, these

problems are even more likely to be triggered because of the new levels of intimacy, responsibility, and give and take required in marriage.

One of the most influential psychologists and researchers on marital success in the last thirty years is Dr. John Gottman. In 1992, Dr. Gottman and colleagues, Buehlman and Katz, were able to predict with 93% accuracy which couples would get divorced.¹ After years of research, Gottman found that four negative behaviors were most likely to be associated with divorce. The first was a pattern of criticizing one's mate. The second was contempt for one's mate from a sense of superiority. The third was a defensive style that refuses to admit or look at one's own contribution to problems in the relationship. And the fourth was withdrawing rather than being able or willing to calmly hang in there and work at finding common ground to solve conflicts and misunderstandings.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "I try to find common ground with everyone, so that I can win them to Christ" (1 Corinthians 9:22b-23, New Living Translation). If Paul worked to find common ground even with the heathens in order to win them to Christ, how much more should we work to find common ground with our spouses! And it turns out that the ability to do this is one hallmark of a strong marriage!

Other traits that make for difficult marriages are high levels of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, subjectivity, rigidity, and impulsivity. By contrast, good marriage partners are generally happy. They tend to feel good about themselves and are relatively non-anxious, flexible, able to be relatively objective, and self-controlled. Some negative characteristics can be appealing during courtship but not so much later on.

Take impulsivity and subjectivity, for example. Someone who is rather impulsive and subjective can be a lot of fun during courtship. He is spontaneous and responsive. She can bring new life to a very serious, objective, and deliberate dating partner. But after marriage, when it's time to plan ahead, do the budget, make long-range decisions, or take on the responsibilities of work or parenting, the impulsivity and subjectivity not only lose their appeal, they can become major sources of conflict that strain the bonds of marriage. What the mate used to consider as "spontaneity" is now called being "impulsive" or "irresponsible." And the subjectivity that used to seem enjoyable is now considered to be irrational. Those traits can easily trigger the first two styles Dr. Gottman found associated with divorce – a pattern of criticizing one's mate and of looking at him or her with contempt from a position of superiority. The result is accusations of being impulsive, irresponsible, or even foolish and irrational. You can see the damage this can do to emotional closeness and fulfillment and mutual respect in marriage.

The same thing can be true when a potential mate is very patient. Patience is generally a wonderful virtue. But some people are so "patient" they refuse to take a stand on anything. They're like a limp, overcooked carrot.

These personality traits show up in nearly everything a person does and thinks, especially in marriage! When a person tends toward the negative side of several of these personality traits, living together can be like nestling against a porcupine.

Many couples considering engagement see a professional counselor and take personality tests before they make final plans to walk down the aisle to say, "I do." Pre-marriage counseling and testing is a wonderful way to take a more objective look at your own and your prospective mate's personality traits. If you aren't able to do that, you may find it helpful to set aside time to discuss the traits and personality styles listed above. Rate yourself and your prospective mate in each dimension from one to ten, and ask him or her to do the same. Then discuss two or three dimensions at a time over a period of a few weeks. Talk about how your similarities and differences might impact your marriage. This will help you decide whether you should head to the altar, or, on the other hand, to a therapist!

When you identify some personality traits that may be problematic, consider several options. You might (1) slow down the relationship; (2) spend lots of time discussing and working through the potential conflict areas; (3) seek professional counseling; or (4) terminate the relationship. But remember this: Marriage won't solve your potential problems, and "hoping" won't make them go away. Take a close look before you leap. The Bible says, "The

prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty" (Proverbs 27:12, New International Version).

2. Life Goals

One evening when Jason and Beth were dating, she looked sweetly at him and asked, "What is your biggest goal in life, Jason?"

To her surprise Jason answered, without hesitation, "I want to make a million bucks as fast as I can, then retire and live off the interest."

Beth laughed. "No, seriously. What are your long-term goals?"

Jason wiped the smile from his face and assured her that he had meant what he said. "I want some fun out of life. I don't want to get so involved in making a living that there's no time for pleasure."

For several weeks Beth turned this and several other things Jason told her over in her mind. She really liked him and enjoyed spending time together. But she was concerned about Jason's lack of more meaningful goals and purposes in life. In time, she decided Jason was not the person she wanted for a husband.

Having compatible goals and understanding each other's plans for the future is vital for a happy marriage. Goals affect every area of our lives. They involve having children – yes, no, and how many – and our education, where we choose to live, our decision to reach out to help people, our spiritual interests, and a host of other factors. Like two front wheels of a car, the more a couple can have similar goals and head in the same direction, the more likely they are to run a straight course in their marriage.

3. Intellectual and Cultural Interests

Another question to consider before marriage is, How compatible are we in terms of our intellectual and cultural interests? In the first blush of emotional love, some couples give little thought to the importance their broad, long-term interests play in producing a happy marriage.

When Edward became interested in a possible life relationship with Michelle, one thing he especially enjoyed was her love of the arts, poetry, and literature. Sharing visits to museums, reading great books, attending plays, and reading poetry stimulated him. Neither Edward nor Michelle cared much for sports but they loved the arts.

By contrast, Jenny and Ryan loved sports and all sorts of outdoor activities. After they married, they spent countless weekends at football games and car races, and enjoyed hiking and camping. Visiting museums and reading books would have bored them stiff.

Both of these couples enriched their marriages through shared recreational interests. This doesn't mean that couples with different interests can't enjoy and enrich each other. They can. But common interests help build togetherness. We need to share in our recreational, vocational, and spiritual interests.

4. Education

Another major consideration is education. One of the fastest ways for a person to change his or her economic status is to obtain a good education. Data from 2015 indicates that the typical college graduate makes almost \$20,000 a year more than a person with only a high school diploma.² That translates to at least a million dollars

over a lifetime. Education not only sharpens our abilities, it is also a key to many doors that otherwise would be closed. Other things being equal, the person with an adequate education is more able to accept responsible positions in the workplace. But the impact of education on marriage goes far beyond jobs and finances. Couples that share a desire to learn and grow can challenge and enrich each other.

Marriage, of course, does not require a college degree. Simply warming a bench in college for four years or longer doesn't make you an open-minded, growing person! In fact, many people with little formal education are extremely wise and growing and knowledgeable. The Apostle Paul, for example, urged older men and women to teach the younger generation how to be self-controlled, and good spouses and parents (Titus 2:1-8). These things are difficult to learn in college. In many ways, life is the best teacher. Just be sure that both you and your prospective mate are willing to be taught!

Kristen was an intelligent, talented, ambitious young woman who fell in love with Tyler, a handsome young man she met at church. When Tyler dropped out of school to take a job with little or no future, Kristen was sure she could "fire" him with the ambition he lacked after they were married. So they tied the knot.

After several children were born and many frustrating experiences, Tyler did attempt to further his education, but he just wasn't motivated. Unfortunately, it wasn't simply Tyler's lack of a formal education that frustrated Kristen. She found that Tyler wasn't interested in most of life. He didn't care about getting ahead at work. He didn't want to be involved in church. He didn't care about politics. And he didn't want to spend time with mutual friends. When he wasn't at work, he just sat around, watched TV, or slept. That wasn't at all the way Kristen had planned to spend her married life.

There are all too many marriages where unhappiness and divorce become the unfortunate fruits of an inadequate motivation to grow and learn.

5. Vocation

How would you feel about spending the rest of your life with a young idealist not interested in accumulating any material things, including a home to live in? Jeremy is content surfing the net, listening to music, and working part-time at a local business. His relaxed lifestyle initially appealed to Allison. He wasn't driven and overly invested in his work like her dad had been while she was growing up. However, after they had been married a few years, Allison began to mature while Jeremy remained content as he was. They become more and more incompatible, and eventually both wished they'd never married.

Consider how many ways your job will impact your marriage:

- Your job and your spouse's job will occupy about one-third of your lives. If you aren't happy there, you probably won't be happy at home either!
- Your job and your spouse's will determine your income, which in turn will determine the type of home and neighborhood you live in, your choice of vacations, your clothing budget, your eating-out budget, the school your children will attend, and on and on.
- If a job takes the spouse from home often, or for long periods of time, it is difficult to build intimacy, and the other spouse may have to assume more than his or her share of responsibilities.
- If employment is seasonal or irregular or paid on commission, your family finances will have to be planned accordingly.
- Stability in your family life can be impacted by your vocation. Some companies require that employees move from place to place every few years if they want to move up the corporate ladder.

- Certain occupations may place heavy social obligations upon the spouse.

These and other factors should be thought through as you consider selecting a life's mate. They impact (affect) happiness or unhappiness in a relationship. And don't naively think, "I'm marrying him, not his job." Spend some serious time reflecting on the ramifications of your prospective spouse's vocation. In a real sense, you do marry your mate's daily work – as well as your own!

And what about two-career marriages? Have you talked through the implications of a two-career marriage on your free time, your time together, your children, your roles at work and home, and your level of family stress and pressure? Two-career marriages may work beautifully, but it's important to think through the implications as thoroughly as possible ahead of time.

And what about this situation: as a young woman, you have vocational aspirations, but your prospective husband wants to marry a wife and a homemaker. Would it be wise for you to give up your vocational goals? Can he guarantee that he will always be around to provide for you, the "homemaker?" Unfortunately, he cannot. Plus, you may want the emotional satisfaction of a career or the security of a credential.

Emily's problem was different. One of five children in a home where there was never enough income, she had decided she would be a working wife and earn enough money for some conveniences. But as time went on, she began to wish her husband would increase his earning capacity. She wanted to spend more time at home. But she never thought to look for such personal qualities in a boyfriend before she became a wife. Now when she brings up her desire for more money or more time at home, her husband becomes resentful and accuses her of nagging.

If you want to avoid these scenarios, discuss your vocational plans before the organist plays, "Here Comes the Bride."

6. Family Involvement

About six months before Clyde and Ruth Narramore were married, a wise family friend gave some good advice. "Clyde," he said, "when you get married, you're going to have three families. Clyde blinked, wondering what he meant. Then his friend continued, saying, "There will be you and Ruth. But you'll also have Ruth's family, and of course, your own parents, brothers, and sister. All three will be important." Then he added that we should try to become well acquainted with each other's families, develop good relationships, and work together as a team.

How wise he was. And how true it became. Clyde and Ruth ended up living next door to Ruth's father and mother for many years. Her parents were incredibly helpful and supportive, and poured so many wonderful things into Clyde and Ruth's children's lives. As the parents aged, Clyde and Ruth took the major responsibility for their care.

Not long ago, a couple considering marriage was being counseled. When the prospective groom was asked how he was relating to his prospective bride's family, he said, "I'm not marrying them. I'm just marrying Amanda. Her folks can do whatever they please. If they don't bother us, we won't bother them."

This sounded good to him, but it really doesn't make sense. Our extended families do "bother us" or help us or encourage us in our efforts to build our own growing family. Even if your relatives live a thousand miles away, they will influence your marriage. Their physical absence may keep you out of open conflict, but if nothing else, it may deprive your children of their grandparents. And even if you seldom speak, the patterns of relating which you and your spouse learned in your own family systems will very likely be lived out in your relationship after marriage. And what about the holidays? Will your mate want to spend Christmas with her relatives? Will you alternate holidays between families? Will you follow your spouse's traditions for celebrating birthdays and holidays, or yours? Or will you establish new ones?

Before marriage, be sure you get a reading on how you understand each other's families. Some prospective brides and grooms have neither faced the realities of family involvement before marriage nor the impact their childhood family experiences will have on their own marriage. It is much better to consider these matters before wedding bells ring, rather than later when conflicts have arisen.

7. Friends

Another area to check out is your compatibility with friends.

You've heard the saying, "You can tell a lot about a person by the company he keeps." As the prophet Amos put it, "Can two people walk together without agreeing on the direction" (Amos 3:3, New Living Translation)? And the Apostle Paul wrote, "Bad company corrupts good morals" (1 Corinthians 15:33, New English Translation). How true! What our friends enjoy, we tend to enjoy. What interests our friends tends to interest us. What our friends don't care for is most likely what we don't care for. And our friends' level of spiritual interest and commitment is probably similar to our own. Otherwise, why would we be spending time with them? Good friends can encourage and lift us up. Friends with poor values can drag us down. Don't expect you or your potential mate's friends to change radically after you've said your vows.

And how about your social interests? What if you are outgoing and enjoy many friends, and your potential spouse is more of a loner? If you marry, will you both be able to adapt and compromise, or will this become a source of continual frustration?

Does your potential mate's lack of interest in spending time with friends reflect a dislike of people? Is it just his or her reserved nature? Does it reflect basic insecurity? Is it a sign of preoccupation with oneself? And for your part, does your gregarious style reflect an inability to be alone and enjoy solitude? Will you try to change your partner or accuse him of being anti-social if he isn't as outgoing as you?

The answers to these questions should give you clues as to what life might be like if you are married to each other 24 hours a day!

8. Spiritual Interests

The first verse in the Bible says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1, New International Version). It goes on to say that God created human beings – Adam and Eve – and the family. Marriage was God's idea. He knew that it would be a wonderful place for companionship, love, nurture, teamwork, and growth! But families can also bring great sorrow. Potentials can turn into problems if we don't build our family relationships around our Creator's design.

Since God created us, who knows better than he how we function best? It is a wonderful experience to share marriage with a partner who also wants to build his or her marriage with God at the center. This spiritual dimension of life is so important that the Bible says we should never marry someone who does not share this spiritual commitment. "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness" (2 Corinthians 6:14, New King James Version)? Unless the two are headed in the same direction spiritually, chances are they will be going in opposite directions in many other areas of life.

The Bible also says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5-6, New International Version). When

two people are committed to Christ, they will both be looking for his direction. And since they will both be seeking God's leading, they will have the potential for much greater unity and depth of sharing.

Our spiritual interests and commitments impact our horizontal relationships as well as our relationship with God. Our spirituality shapes our entire worldview. It influences the way we choose to invest our time. It impacts our resilience in times of crises, the friends we choose, our work, and our leisure time. It is a blessing to marry a person who is a committed Christian, and then grow together spiritually through the years. The enrichment God will bring to your marriage can never be fathomed. And the guidance, comfort, and support God gives you through the years, including the difficult experiences of life, are beyond comparison.

Consequently, it is of utmost importance if you are considering marriage, to be devoted to Christ yourself. Then, make sure your intended mate is as well!

Looking ahead

No one can be a perfect mate, and no one can choose a perfect mate. God created marriage to help us mature and grow, and he knows that all couples will have their share of struggles. But it is tremendously important that we are aware of as many of our areas of compatibility and incompatibility as possible before marriage. And when the potential problems are clearly too great to build a fulfilling, enjoyable, long life together, we need to wait until God leads us to a compatible partner.

References

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Dr. Clyde M. Narramore (1916 – 2015) was the founder of the Narramore Christian Foundation. He was a well-known radio and conference speaker, and the author of more than twenty books including *The Psychology of Counseling* and *The Way to Happiness*.

Dr. Bruce Narramore was the founding dean of the Rosemead School of Psychology, and served as President of the Narramore Christian Foundation for 13 years. He has authored and co-authored ten books including the best seller *Help! I'm a Parent* and *The Integration of Psychology and Theology*.