

10 Things You Need to Know Before You Get Married¹

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Americans love romantic books and movies that involve wedding vows and “happily-ever-after” endings. Most young people feel that a good marriage and family life are very important, and many expect to marry for a lifetime, fulfilling their deepest needs.ⁱ Despite the importance we place on marriage and family, many of us are also concerned with divorce rates that have more than doubled since the last half of the twentieth century.ⁱⁱ In response to the high rates of divorce, a growing trend has emerged that focuses on developing a *healthy marriage*, rather than just the act of marriage. This document presents ten ways to achieve a healthy marriage of your own.

Helpful Information

Adults and children both are more likely to thrive inside a healthy and happy marriage. Studies show many links between a healthy marriage and better health and well-being for both men and women.ⁱⁱⁱ Couples who marry and stay married tend to live longer and reduce their risk of chronic illness later in life.^{iv} It is encouraging to know that the ingredients of a healthy marriage can be learned if partners are interested and motivated to grow their friendship.^v

A healthy marriage is not something we just “have or don’t have”; it is something we either work at and develop or we neglect. “In marriage,” as Goddard and Marshall (2007) have expressed, “the grass grows greener on the side of the fence you water most.” The quality of our marriage may change over time depending upon how well we water it.⁶ In fact, many couples don’t end their marriages because of

too much conflict and arguing, but because they’ve just quit growing it.

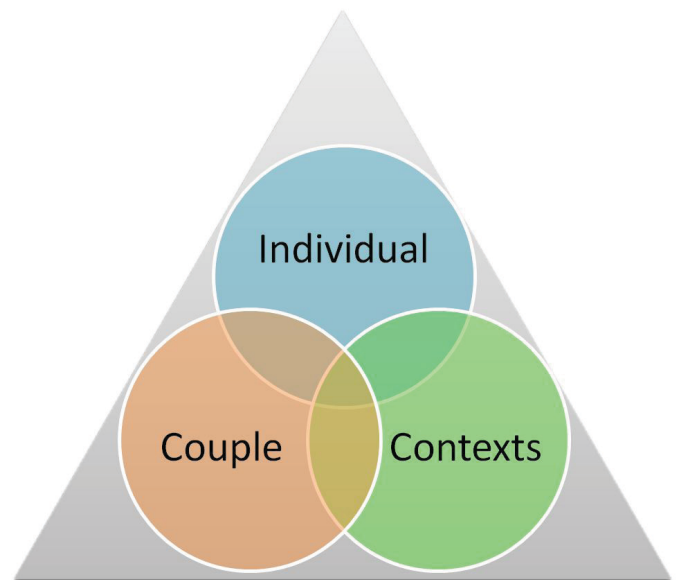


Figure 1. The three major factors that predict future marital satisfaction—our individual traits, our traits as a couple, and our personal and relationship contexts—form what is known as the marriage triangle model. (See: Larson, 2003)

Top 10 Things You Need to Know #1: There Are Three Stages of Marriage

According to Jeffrey Larson (2003), most marriages go through at least three stages of development. Let’s take a closer look at these.

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Romantic Love—Passion and physical attraction are most important during this phase. Issues like sacrifice, selfishness, expectations, and crisis are not typically faced very often at this stage.

Disillusionment and Distraction—During this stage, daily life stressors occur and expectations have to be changed. Couples often feel disappointed and unfulfilled by the end of this stage.

Dissolution, Adjustment with Resignation, or Adjustment with Contentment—A couple has at least three options during this stage:

- They can separate or end the marriage.
- They can adjust to the new reality, expecting that their marriage will not improve and they will continue to grow apart.
- They can work hard on the relationship, gain new tools, work through issues, and develop a greater but different love, with a little romantic love added back into the mix.

#2: Don't Buy into Common Marriage Myths

One common marriage myth comes to us from folklore: “Never go to bed angry with your spouse.” It’s important to understand, though, that sometimes when we’re tired and stressed we may just need to sleep on it and settle the issue the next morning. A tired mind may cause us to say something we later regret. Larson (2003) shares some other common myths:

- “If my partner and I have a disagreement, our relationship is doomed!” The *truth* is that conflict that is handled constructively can be a healthy way to improve our marriage.
- “If my spouse loves me, s/he should know what I want and need to be happy.” The *truth* is that it is our responsibility to communicate our expectations so our spouse knows what we need to be happy.
- “I can change my spouse by pointing out his/her weaknesses, errors, and other flaws.” The *truth* is that criticizing our partner and focusing on weaknesses, errors, and flaws rather than strengths and positive traits will only promote negativity and damage our marital friendship.
- “Marriage should always be a 50–50 partnership.” The *truth* is that there are many times throughout a marriage that one partner or the other gives more than 50 percent.

In fact, some couples may be happy and stable with 60–40 and 70–30 partnerships.

If you’re feeling stressed because something in your marriage isn’t going the way it’s “supposed” to go, check to make sure you’re not holding on to a marriage myth.

#3: Marital Satisfaction Can Be Predicted by Three Important Factors

There are three general factors that can help predict how happy and stable your marriage will be (Larson and Holman, 1994). These factors are (from least predictive to most predictive): background and contexts, individual traits and behaviors, and couple traits and interactions. Put together, these three factors form what Larson (2003) calls the Marriage Triangle. Each group of factors has an impact on the others.

#4: Contexts Are the Settings in Which People Develop Individual or Couple Characteristics

Contexts are included in the Marriage Triangle because they are the foundation for building individual and couple traits. There are personal contexts, which include everything we bring into the marriage (e.g., the quality of our parents’ marriage, or how we fit into our original family), and relationship contexts, which include qualities from the marriage itself (e.g., support from in-laws, unresolved marital problems, financial issues, etc.).

#5: Individual Traits Include Your Own Personality, Attitudes, and Skills

Taking care of ourselves socially, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and physically can contribute to our overall marital satisfaction. For example, some individual traits such as having difficulty coping with stress, believing marriage myths, impulsive behavior, untreated depression, extreme self-consciousness or excessive anger and hostility can stand in the way of our marital happiness and stability. Alternatively, individual traits such as being social, flexible, and assertive as well as having high levels of self-esteem, commitment, and an ability to love are some of the important factors that can help us find and experience marital happiness and stability.

#6: Couple Traits Include Communication and Conflict-resolution Skills

Some positive couple traits, according to Larson (2003), are as follows:

- **Cohesion**—Time spent together often leads to a feeling of emotional closeness.
- **Intimacy**—This includes a combination of affection, sexual relations, cohesion and being open and vulnerable with each other.
- **Control or Power Sharing**—If one person has too much power or control in decision-making, there may be a feeling of dissatisfaction. When there is equitable give-and-take, both spouses tend to be more satisfied.
- **Consensus**—How we are able to agree with our partner on issues is what is important here. We can reach consensus by being alike, by accepting differences or by healthy conflict resolution.

#7: Change Yourself First

According to Douglas Abbot (2003), there are at least three really important principles that can lead us toward greater marital happiness and stability: (1) Change our behavior; (2) Change our attitude; and (3) Change our heart. We can get “stuck” in our relationships if we believe the false idea that our relationships can only get better if our partner will change. There is so much we can do to gain new knowledge, new attitudes, and new skills that will help us change our relationships in positive ways.

#8: Practice the 80–20 Rule

Dr. Abbot (2003) developed the 80–20 rule after he read a story called “80 percent I love you, 20 percent I hate you.” The point is to overlook the few small things (20 percent) that we may dislike about our partner and to focus on the many things (80 percent) that we like.

#9: Change Our Heart

This goes along with the 80–20 rule. It’s important to allow our hearts to change along with our behavior. Even though we can’t force our hearts to change, we can make ourselves available for a change of heart by doing the right things for the right reasons in our relationships. If we need to say we are sorry, for example, doing the right thing by asking for forgiveness is part of changing our heart.

#10: Seek Marital Therapy

Most relationships get “stuck” at some point along the way and need some help to get “unstuck.” Seeking marital therapy doesn’t mean we’re weak or foolish. Wise couples seek marital therapy early, before their marriage has a chance to fall apart (see www.therapistlocator.com).

Things You Can Use

Most marriages fall somewhere along a continuum from unhealthy to healthy. They grow and change with time and effort. When we are willing to gain new knowledge and relationship skills, our “marriages,” according to one author, “can do more than merely survive: They can also thrive.”^{vii} Use the selected guidelines presented in Table 1 to build a healthy marriage, right from the start.

Tracking how we are doing at regularly using these guidelines is an important way to measure our potential marital happiness. Don’t get discouraged if you find out you are not using these guidelines as regularly as you would like to. It’s normal. At the end of each day, take a minute and put a “+” or a “-” next to each guideline as you track how well you did with one or more of them throughout the day. Put this sheet up on the refrigerator door to remind you of how you are doing. When you become proficient at using these guidelines consistently, you can then better help your partner to use them regularly. Good luck, and remember to enjoy the journey!

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^{vi} Moore, Jekielek, Bronte-Tinkew, Guzman, Ryan & Redd, Op. cit.

^{vii} Howell, Op. cit.

Table 1. Guidelines for building a healthy marriage

Target Behavior:	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Totals
1. Marriage Myths	+							
2. Positive Communication (Cohesion; Intimacy)	+							
3. Constructive Conflict Resolution (Power Sharing; Consensus)	-							
4. Change Yourself First								
5. The 80-20 Rule								
6. Change Your Heart								