

How do I help someone...

... prepare for marriage?

Marriage for many people is an important element of life. Couples preparing for marriage go through a preparation program ideally conducted by the marriage celebrant and his wife to help them prepare. The material following is covered in such a program. However, helping people in marriage is something we can all do. Considering the following can help us all at any time in our own marriages and also make us aware of the issues facing couples as they prepare for their exciting time.

Editor



Preparing for marriage is much more than choosing a venue, clothing, guests and attendants and organising the other myriad things that go into a ceremony. While these are important for a successful wedding there are other and more important matters to consider that will endure long past the “big day”.

Why do people marry? God says in Genesis that Adam was not complete until he had a companion who shared his intellectual, social, physical and spiritual attributes. Genesis also tells us that Adam’s choice of Eve for a wife was deliberate, it did not just happen. The emphasis in Genesis and other places in Scripture is the development of a oneness, a unity between a man and a woman that will reflect the glory of God and so be a comfort to each other.

Marriage is a partnership comprising a physical union (sex) with the probable production of children, the provision of a family home, the development of trust and security, economic stability and good communication. Most importantly, God must be at the centre of the relationship with each person serving the other in kindness and love to the end that they both, along with their children, will be acceptable to God.

Relationship with God

It is essential if a marriage is to prosper that God must be at its centre. Before a wedding is the time to ensure this begins. Regular consideration of Scripture together, and praying together is a good foundation for a marriage to prosper and should never be neglected. It is important for the husband to understand that his role is not to dominate his wife but to help her grow in her relationship with God. If a husband is to be the true “head of the house” it can only be done through service. And so too with the wife: true obedience to her husband is not just saying “yes dear” to all he says. It is important to have a relationship of respectful love where each partner honours the other and contributes to their spiritual growth. True obedience is obedience to the commands of God to love, honour and serve.

Some things that might be considered:

- Plan to pray together.
- Plan to pray for your family, brothers and sisters, children, friends and those in need.
- Which will be your home ecclesia?
- What ecclesial activities will you attend?
- What ecclesial activities will you be involved in helping to organise?

Self-knowledge

An important thing for a person to do is to understand their own character, what motivates them to think and speak the way they do and for them to understand why they react to positive and negative experiences the way they do: in other words, what drives them to be the sort of person they are.

Some things that might be considered:

- How did I learn conflict resolution? Did my family settle matters through a great deal of noise or were matters avoided because of disinterest or fear of conflict, or was there reasoned and calm discussion?
- How do I react to conflict? Do I become angry, shout, feel betrayed and insecure or do I see difference of opinion as a chance to grow, to understand the other person and myself better, to see events and ideas from a different perspective?
- How do I manage my money?
- How do I feel about a sexual relationship? Do I look forward to that deep level of communication with joy or am I concerned about it? If I am concerned, is it because of past experiences that need discussion with my partner and/or with the assistance of a professional counsellor?

Communication

Respectful communication is a key to a good relationship. Marriage counsellors site poor communication as one of the main factors in marriage breakdown.

Some things that might be considered:

- Does one or the other do most of the talking and not give respect and close attention to what the other is saying?
- Do we seek for clarification of what the other is saying to ensure any response we might make is addressing the other's concern?

- Do we consciously give each other time to think about and express views?
- To what extent does my upbringing affect my approach to conflict resolution and could I do better?
- Do we choose the best time for discussing a difficult matter or don't we care if the other is tired, stressed or not well?
- Does one or the other regard conflict as winning or losing rather than a chance to understand the other better?
- Do we have an agreed process when discussing difficult matters?
- Do we take turns to speak and not use blame?
- Do we use positive language rather than blanket statements such as "you always..." or "you never..."?
- Do we clarify what the other is saying eg. "when you say ... are you meaning..."?
- Do we consider tone of voice, inflection and body language?
- A good sentence to use is: "I understand how you feel. Let me explain what I did as I saw it".

Finance

The management of money can be a source of conflict and it can be an issue at the forefront of marriage problems. Before marriage is the best time to start a conversation about financial priorities.

We live in one of the most affluent societies in the world. A brief consideration of the living standards of many people in other countries should make us aware of just how much most of us have. This does not mean that some in our country are not poor and struggle to live on the tiny income they receive. This should excite our sympathy and concern and hopefully lead us to consider ways we might better support them.

Can money really bring happiness? Is having more money a guarantee of a better relationship and a better quality of life? We should think carefully about how we might use the resources God has provides us with.

True riches reside in other places. God tells us to seek first his Kingdom and make that the priority and sufficient food, drink, clothing and shelter will be available to us. It does not have to be rich and sumptuous food nor a large and beautifully furnished house. Far more important than these is the development of a relationship that is warm and loving where companionship and trust are the hallmarks.

Some things that might be considered:

- How do we regard our possessions? Do we see them as gifts from God to use wisely?
- Who does the money in the bank belong to: you or me or is it ours?
- Do we trust each other in the management of our money?
- Does either have a problem with impulse spending?
- Will each have a discretionary budget to spend how they wish?
- Will there be joint priorities such as repayment of a home loan, children's education, holidays, medical expenses, new car etc.
- Have we formulated a budget to guide us in our allocation of funds and a savings regime?
- How do we both feel about giving generously to meet the needs of others?

Intimacy – It's more than sex

While sexual intercourse is an important component of a marriage it is not unusual for this to modify as years go by. There is much research that indicates companionship outside a physical relationship becomes more and more important. If a relationship is based on physical attraction alone the marriage may not last much beyond seven years and if it does it can be an emotionally sterile place to be. The term “choosing to love” is an important one to consider. Marriage is as much about thinking as it is about feeling. True companionship is a choice to be made and developed starting before the wedding.

It can be useful to discuss sexual relations before a wedding so that a good groundwork is set for the first months in particular. God created us as sexual beings not only for the production of children but also as a means of developing a deep and highly intimate bond. For this to occur sexual intercourse should at all times be respectful of each other while understanding just how vulnerable each might feel. Each should be prepared to give pleasure as well as receiving it. God made us to enjoy sexual relations.

Some things that might be considered:

- Have you discussed and agreed upon method(s) of contraception you might employ?
- When might you have children?
- Are you prepared to be open with the other about what you think you might or might not enjoy in sexual intercourse?
- Have you discussed other things you might enjoy together such as hiking, swimming, reading together, holding each other, conversation?
- Set aside time when you can be alone together to relax and enjoy each other's company. We mostly live busy lives and it can be all too easy to be so lost in the demands of work, family and ecclesia that intimacy in all its forms can be lost. Just living together in the same house is not an intimate relationship.

Relationship with Parents

This can be the source of great joy and comfort but it might also be a source of conflict. Developing trust and good communication with each other's parents is very important.

Some things that might be considered:

- How do my parents regard the person I am marrying?
- Talk to the other's parents, show an interest in what they are doing, discover what they are interested in.
- If it is obvious one set of parents will have difficulty in letting go of their child, what might be done to ensure that the relationship is not fractured?
- If there are poor relationships and this persists don't let the matter go but seek guidance in how to improve interactions.

Conclusion

As we are very much aware, the period before a marriage can sometimes be difficult for the couple as they contemplate living together. We need to be sensitive to their situation and encourage them to talk to one another in a calm and constructive fashion being careful to lead them to reflect on the challenges they might be facing rather than tell them how to solve them. While our own experience in the period prior to our wedding can be useful, we need to be careful not to spend time merely telling stories about our experiences: while they might be interesting to us, they need not be to the couple.

Finally, confidentiality is very important. If others are told about what has been discussed without the explicit permission of the couple, they might feel betrayed and not come back to you for guidance. If you see a matter might affect the welfare of the couple in a serious fashion. If you believe it is necessary to share that information with another, it is better to assist the couple to speak to whoever might need to know.

Being asked for support by a couple before they marry is a privilege and must be treated sensitively while looking to the ultimate aim of assisting them to honour God through their developing relationship.

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