

## MARRIAGE: HOW DO YOU DO IT?

Spring is here. Summer is approaching. A time to rededicate ourselves to excellence in every area of our lives. Our marriage might be a wise place to begin.

Yesterday some friends told us of a recurring theme at a dinner party they attended. A single, unaccompanied woman, probably in her 50's, repeatedly asked the other couples how long they had been married and "How do you do it?"

One wife said, "We believe in commitment. We are committed to being the best possible spouse for one another every day." A husband spoke up and said, "We like each other. We're good friends. We have common values, beliefs and awareness of being equal partners."

Of course, there are endless possible answers to this question. Each couple may have answers unique to them. Here are a few answers derived from professional research, common sense and personal experience.

### **Empirical Research**

Harville Hendrix in Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples, states that our unconscious mind does the mate selection. A fascinating thought. Something clicks inside of us and we know this is the person for me. How do we keep this love alive?

Murray Bowen in Family Therapy in Clinical Practice complicates our thinking by proclaiming that we marry a person having an equal level of mental health. That's a hard pill to swallow! It reminds me of that bar and restaurant in Baltimore, "Birds of a Feather".

John Gottman gives us my favorite marital strategy. He calls it "The BID System". Each time a person initiates a conversation, it is a bid for a response. In responding, we either turn "toward" the other person and it is a fulfilling exchange; we may turn "away" and it is unsatisfying; we may turn "against" and it is destructive of the relationship. Another nail in the marital coffin!

Thomas Gordon in Family Effectiveness Training teaches living in "win-win" relationships. Having win-lose endings to any issue eventually leads to a lose-lose life. Caring just as much about the other person's feelings and needs as you do your own leads to a satisfying win-win marriage/life.

Some experts explain that the main difference between a healthy marriage and an unhealthy one is the ability to resolve the endless issues that arise in married life. In an unhealthy marriage it is the same issue over and over; it never gets resolved. In a healthy marriage it's just one issue after another because that's life!

### **Common Sense**

The healthier we are individually the easier it is to be relational. We say it takes two healthy individuals to form a healthy couple. What is the pivotal essence of emotional healthiness? Self-respect. If we don't value/respect ourselves we'll get

trampled! A hard truth: if you're not able to stand up for yourself, you won't have a marriage of mutual respect.

In our deepest heart what do we long for? Some say, to overcome our separateness; to be able to share who we are, our entire being in safety, having total confidence in our spouse's ability to be accepting and nurturing. See [The Transparent Self](#) by Sidney Jourard.

If you have not already done it, take the time to identify your spiritual or philosophical beliefs about marriage. Simply put, our beliefs create our feelings and then our behaviors. If we misbehave, we are acting in a manner that is congruent with a belief. The first challenge is to connect with our beliefs, which may be very subtle or elusive.

### **Personal Experience**

One marital challenge is to rejoice in our differentness from our spouse. There are countless examples. She likes smooth peanut butter, I like crunchy.

We marry our opposite. This complementarity tends to be more pronounced when we marry young; older people tend to marry people more like themselves. Knowing our personality type helps us to be more understanding and accepting of one another. See [www.peoplemapsystems.com](http://www.peoplemapsystems.com).

When we learn of someone divorcing many of us ask, "What happened?" The answer is rarely a single event. Married love is killed one day or one interaction at a time, just as it is rekindled in each interaction. Go back in this article to John Gottman's BID System. Strengthen your self-management by meditating daily to increase self-awareness and noticing the absolute necessity of the observing ego.

Totally amazing is how some spouses are incessantly and comfortably unresponsive to one another. They may not be consciously malevolent but nevertheless the impact is harmful and painful. Their need gets greater consideration than their spouse's need. As Jesus said, "They know not what they are doing".

### **Closing Thoughts**

We could go on and on. Most of us have solid ideas about how to make a marriage work. I urge you to sit down and write out your personal philosophy of marriage. Some examples are: never go to bed angry with one another, live win-win, go to bed together and get up together, balance togetherness and separateness, have a weekly date night, make time to make love, ask for feedback, "How are we doing?", take time to connect daily. The list is endless!

I hope this helps that curious, inquiring woman at that dinner party. Enjoy the new life of spring!

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