

SAVING YOUR MARRIAGE BEFORE IT STARTS

EXPANDED & UPDATED EDITION

SEVEN QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE
—AND AFTER—YOU MARRY

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Question One

Have You Faced the Myths of Marriage with Honesty?

We have been poisoned by fairy tales.

ANAIS NIN

Tom and Laura came to see us just nine months after their wedding. They had swallowed the happily-ever-after myth whole and were now feeling queasy. “Before we got married we couldn’t bear to be apart from one another,” Laura confided. “We did almost everything together, and I thought that’s how it would be in our marriage, even more so.” She paused for a moment. “But now Tom needs more space. It seems like he’s not the guy I married.”

Tom rolled his eyes as Laura continued: “He used to be so considerate and thoughtful before we were married—”

“Oh, and I’m a total slouch now?” Tom interrupted.

“Of course not. You—or maybe *we*—are just different now.”

Nervously twisting his wedding band, Tom looked at Laura: “Marriage isn’t what I expected either. I didn’t expect it to be a big honeymoon or anything; I just thought you would try to make life a little easier for me. Instead, when I come home from the office, all you want is to go out or—”

“I make dinner every night for you,” Laura interrupted.

Surprised by their display of unrestrained emotion in front of us, they stopped silent and looked to us as if to say, “See, our marriage isn’t what it’s supposed to be.”

“And they lived happily ever after” is one of the most tragic sentences in literature. It’s tragic because it’s a falsehood. It is a myth that has led generations to expect something from marriage that is not possible.

JOSHUA LIEVMAN

Tom and Laura entered their marriage believing that happiness would abound. They had heard that marriage was hard work, but they didn’t expect it to be a twenty-four-hour, seven-day-a-week job.

The belief in a happily-ever-after marriage is one of the most widely held and destructive marriage myths. But it is only the tip of the marital-myth iceberg. Every difficult marriage is plagued by a vast assortment of misconceptions about what marriage should be.¹ In this chapter, however, we consider only those ideas that are most harmful and most common:

1. “We expect exactly the same things from marriage.”
2. “Everything good in our relationship will get better.”
3. “Everything bad in my life will disappear.”
4. “My spouse will make me whole.”

The goal of this chapter is to take the mythology out of marriage. For too long, marriage has been saddled with unrealistic expectations and misguided assumptions. Liberated from these four myths, couples can settle into the real world of marriage—with all its joys and sorrows, passion and pain.

Myth One: “We Expect Exactly the Same Things from Marriage”

What we anticipate seldom occurs, what we least expect generally happens—especially in marriage. Saying “I do” brings with it a host of conscious and unconscious expectations that aren’t always fulfilled.

Neil and Cathy, a couple in their late twenties and married for four years, each had a clear image of what life together would be like, but they had never discussed their ideas. They, like most newlyweds, simply assumed the other had an identical picture of marriage in mind. Nothing, however, could have been further from the truth.

Cathy: “I expected married life to bring more stability and predictability to our lifestyle. To me it meant working in the garden together.”

Neil: “I wanted our marriage to be exciting and spontaneous, not a ho-hum routine. To me it meant riding a motorcycle together.”

As far back as early childhood, Neil and Cathy began dreaming of how married life would be. They grew up in homes where parents modeled “married life.” They read books describing loving relationships. They watched television shows and movies depicting scenes from marriage. For years they had fantasized about life after crossing the threshold. With little effort, each had formed an idea of what it would and should be like to live as a married couple.

Consciously and unconsciously, Neil and Cathy painted brushstrokes on their mental marital canvases. But it never occurred to either of them that the other might be working from a different palette. They simply *assumed* their lifelong partner would work with complementary colors and in a similar style.

The first year of marriage, however, revealed sharp and unexpected contrasts. What Cathy thought of as security, Neil thought of as boring. They valued many of the same things, but with different levels of intensity. Cathy painted carefully with delicate pastels; Neil painted boldly with primary colors.

Most incongruous expectations fall into two major categories: unspoken rules and unconscious roles. Bringing both of them out into the open can save years of wear and tear on a young marriage.

Unspoken Rules

Everyone lives by a set of rules that is rarely spoken but always known. Needless to say, unspoken rules become more vocal when our spouse “breaks” them. This became painfully obvious to us when we visited our families for the first time as a married couple.

One Christmas, we flew from Los Angeles to Chicago to be with our families for the holidays. The first night was at my (Leslie’s) house. As was my family’s custom, I woke up early in the morning to squeeze in every possible minute with my family. Les, on the other hand, slept in.

I interpreted Les’s sleeping as avoidance and rejection and felt he did not value time with my family. “It’s embarrassing to me,” I told Les. “Everyone is up and eating in the kitchen. Don’t you want to be with us?”

Les, on the other hand, didn’t understand my intensity. “What did I do? I’m just catching up from jet lag. I’ll come down after my shower,” he said. As I found out later, Les expected a slower, easier pace during the holidays, because that’s the way it was at his house.

In this incident, Les had broken a rule he didn’t know existed, and I discovered a rule I had never put into words. Both of us felt misunderstood and frustrated. We both had our own ideas about what was acceptable, and it never occurred to either of us that our expectations would be so different. Each of us became irritated by the other’s unspoken expectations and frustrated that the other did not live by the same rules.

Since that first Christmas we have learned to discuss our secret expectations and make our silent rules known. We have also helped the couples we counsel to become more aware of their own unspoken rules, to keep little problems from becoming big ones. Here is a sampling of the rules we have heard from other couples:

- Don’t interrupt another’s work.
- Always buy organic fruits and vegetables.
- Don’t ask for help unless you are desperate.
- Downplay your successes.

- Always leave the butter on the counter (not in the fridge).
- Don't work too long or too hard.
- Always celebrate birthdays in a big way.
- Never raise your voice.
- Don't talk about your body.
- Always be on time.
- Clean the kitchen before you go to bed.
- Don't talk about your feelings.
- Always pay bills the day they arrive.
- Don't drive fast.
- Never buy dessert at a restaurant.
- Only use a credit card in an emergency.
- Don't buy expensive gifts.

Exercise 1: Your Personal Ten Commandments

Are you walking through a marital minefield of unspoken rules? The workbook exercise *Your Personal Ten Commandments* can help you heighten your awareness of your unspoken rules and thus avoid needless explosions. It will help you recognize that you are free to accept, reject, challenge, and change the rules for the sake of your relationship.

Unconscious Roles

The second source of mismatched expectations involves the unconscious roles that you and your partner fall into, almost involuntarily. Just as an actor in a dramatic performance follows a script, so do married couples. Without knowing it, a bride and groom are drawn into acting out roles that they form from a blend of their personal dispositions, family backgrounds, and marital expectations.

Mark and Jenny ran into their unconscious roles head-on when they returned from their honeymoon and began to set up house, arranging

furniture, organizing closets, and hanging pictures. Before they knew it, they were fighting. “Where do you want this table?” Mark asked. “I don’t know; where do you think it should go?” Jenny replied. “Just tell me where to put it!” Mark said, exasperated. Over and over again, they repeated this scenario, each one looking to the other to take the lead, but neither one doing so.

Unconsciously, Jenny and Mark were acting out the roles they had observed in their families of origin. Jenny’s dad, a fix-it kind of person with a decorator’s eye, had all the right tools and was handy around the house. Her mom simply assisted him when needed. Mark’s dad, on the other hand, was a busy executive who hardly knew how to replace a burned-out light bulb, and his mom was the one who organized the home. Needless to say, Mark and Jenny took on their “assigned” roles as husband and wife, then wondered why the other wasn’t pulling his or her weight.

Of course, there are an endless number of unconscious roles husbands and wives fall into. Some of the more common ones include:

- the planner
- the shopper
- the secret-keeper
- the comedian
- the cleaner
- the navigator
- the money manager
- the cook
- the gift-buyer

If you are like most couples, you will try to follow a script that was written by the role models you grew up with. Being aware of this natural tendency is often all it takes to save you from a disappointing drama. Once you are aware of the roles you each tend to take, you can then discuss how to write a new script together.

*Too many people miss
the silver lining because
they’re expecting gold.*

MAURICE SEITTER

Because of their prescribed roles, Mark and Jenny went through their first year of marriage without ever hanging a single picture! Not until they were in counseling did Mark and Jenny become aware of the reason for their stalemate and make a decision to change

their unconsciously assigned roles. As Jenny said, “Writing our own script makes me feel like we are building our *own* marriage and not just being robots.”

Exercise 2: Making Your Roles Conscious

Are you expecting a specific script to be played out in your marriage? Do you find yourself or your partner reading the wrong lines? To play your parts on a conscious level, take time to complete the workbook exercise *Making Your Roles Conscious*. It may help you recast your parts and avoid a disenchanting drama.

The expectations you bring to your partnership can make or break your marriage. Don't miss out on the sterling moments of marriage because your ideals are out of sync with your partner's. Don't believe the myth that you and your partner automatically come with the same expectations for marriage. Instead, remember that the more openly you discuss your differing expectations, the more likely you are to create a vision of marriage that you agree on—one that is unique to the two of you.

Myth Two: “Everything Good in Our Relationship Will Get Better”

One need only listen to just about any top-forty song on the radio to hear the common but destructive myth that says everything good in a relationship will get better. The truth is that not *everything* gets better. Many things improve in relationships, but some things become more difficult. Every successful marriage requires necessary losses, and in choosing to marry, you inevitably go through a mourning process.

For starters, marriage is a rite of passage that often means giving up childhood. Molly, a twenty-three-year-old newlywed, recalled the unexpected loss she felt just after her engagement: “As soon as we announced that we were getting married I became like a little girl.

That night I cried on my father's shoulder and had this terribly sad feeling that I was leaving my family forever. I looked at David, my fiancé, and thought, *Who is this man who is taking me away?*"

Marriage means giving up a carefree lifestyle and coming to terms with new limits. It means unexpected inconveniences.

Mike Mason, in his delightful book *The Mystery of Marriage*, likens marriage to a tree growing up through the center of one's living room. "It is something that is just there, and it is huge, and everything has been built around it, and wherever one happens to be going—to the fridge, to bed, to the bathroom, or out the front door—the tree has to be taken into account. It cannot be gone through; it must respectfully be gone around. . . . It is beautiful, unique, exotic: but also, let's face it, it is at times an enormous inconvenience."²

Marriage is filled with both enjoyable and tedious trade-offs, but by far the most dramatic loss experienced in a new marriage is the idealized image you have of your partner. This was the toughest myth we encountered in our marriage. Each of us had an airbrushed mental picture of who the other was. But eventually, married life asked us to look reality square in the face and reckon with the fact that we did not marry the person we thought we did. And—brace yourself—neither will you.

Most relationships begin with an emotional honeymoon, a time of deep and passionate romance. But this romance is invariably temporary. In *The Road Less Traveled*, Dr. Scott Peck says that "no matter whom we fall in love with, we sooner or later fall out of love if the relationship continues long enough." He does not mean that we cease loving our partner. He means that the feeling of ecstatic love that characterizes the experience of falling in love always passes. "The honeymoon always ends," he states. "The bloom of romance always fades."³

It is an illusion that the romance in the beginning of a relationship will last forever. This may be hard to swallow (it was for us), but debunking the myth of eternal romance will do more than just about anything to help you build a lifelong happy marriage.

Here's the bottom line: Each of us constructs an idealized image of the person we marry. The image is planted by our partner's eager efforts to put his best foot forward,⁴ but it takes root in the rich soil of our romantic fantasies. We *want* to see our partner at his best. We imagine, for example, that he would never become irritable or put on excess weight. We seek out and attend to what we find admirable and blank out every blemish. We see him as more noble, more attractive, more intelligent, more gifted than he really is. But not for long.

The stark fact is that this phase is necessarily fleeting. Some experts believe the half-life of romantic love is about three months, after which you have only half the amount of romantic feelings you started out with. Others believe romantic love stays at a peak for two to three years before starting to fade. Whichever theory is correct, you can be sure that the enchantment of romance will begin to fade eventually. The point is that we marry an image and only later discover the real person.

An attorney we know who handles many divorce cases told us that the number-one reason two people split up is that they “refuse to accept the fact that they are married to a *human being*.”

In every marriage, mutual hope gives way to mutual disillusionment the moment you realize your partner is not the perfect person you thought you married. But then again, he can't be. No human being can fulfill our idealized dreams. A letdown is inevitable. But there is sunshine behind the dark clouds of disappointment. Once you realize that your marriage is not a source of constant romance, you can appreciate the fleeting moments of romance for what they are—a very special experience.

Here's the good news: Disenchantment enables you to move into a deeper intimacy.

*Disappointment to
a noble soul is what cold
water is to burning metal;
it strengthens, tempers,
intensifies, but never
destroys it.*

ELIZA TABOR

Exercise 3: From Idealizing to Realizing Your Partner

Once we accept the fact that all experiences of love do not conform to the ecstasy of romance, once we relinquish the hoped-for ideals of our partnership, we gain strength and discover the true beauty of marriage. The workbook exercise *From Idealizing to Realizing Your Partner* can help you take the first steps in that direction.

Myth Three: “Everything Bad in My Life Will Disappear”

This myth has been handed down through countless generations, and its widespread appeal is epitomized in such storybook legends as *Cinderella*. In this story, a poor stepdaughter who toils as a servant for her wicked stepfamily is rescued by a handsome and gallant Prince Charming. They fall in love and “live happily ever after.”

No matter that Cinderella has been socialized to feel at home among the kitchen ashes and would have no idea how to behave in the pomp and circumstance of the royal court. No matter that Prince Charming has grown up in an entirely different culture and acquired its education, tastes, and manners. No matter that the two of them know nothing about each other’s attitudes toward the roles of wives and husbands. All they have in common is a glass slipper and a foot that fits it!

“Of course, love doesn’t work that way,” you say. “It’s just a child’s fable.” That’s true. But deep down, we long for a Prince Charming or Cinderella to right the wrongs and make everything bad go away.

Many people marry to avoid or escape unpleasantness. But no matter how glorious the institution of marriage, it is not a substitute for the difficult work of inner spiritual healing. Marriage does not erase personal pain or eliminate loneliness. Why? Because people get married primarily to further their own well-being, not to take care of their partner’s needs. The bad traits and feelings you carried around

before you were married remain with you as you leave the wedding chapel. A marriage certificate is not a magical glass slipper.

Marriage is, in actual fact, just a way of living. Before marriage, we don't expect life to be all sunshine and roses, but we seem to expect life after marriage to be that way. Psychiatrist John Levy, who counsels many married couples, writes that "people who have found everything disappointing are surprised and pained when marriage proves no exception. Most of the complaints about . . . matrimony arise not because it is worse than the rest of life, but because it is not incomparably better."⁵

Getting married cannot instantly cure all our ills, but marriage *can* become a powerful healing agent over time. If you are patient, marriage can help you overcome even some of the toughest of tribulations.

When three Colorado psychologists ran a marriage survey in the *Rocky Mountain News*, they were surprised by "the number of people who endured traumatic childhoods [as abused children or children of alcoholic or divorced parents] and healed themselves through good marriages." As one of the researchers explained it, "Good marriages overcome things we tend to think of as irretrievable losses or irreconcilable tragedies." In other words, there has been a major shift in focus from marriage therapy to *marriage as therapy*.

All of us, at least unconsciously, marry in the hope of healing our wounds. Even if we do not have a traumatic background, we still have hurts and unfulfilled needs that we carry inside. We all suffer from feelings of self-doubt, unworthiness, and inadequacy. No matter how nurturing our parents were, we never received enough attention and love. So in marriage we look to our spouse to convince us that we are worthwhile and to heal our infirmities.⁶

In *Getting the Love You Want*, pastoral psychotherapist Harvell Hendrix explains that a healthy marriage becomes a place to wrap up unfinished business from childhood. The healing process begins gradually by uncovering and acknowledging our unresolved childhood issues. The healing continues through the years as we allow our spouses to love us and as we learn how to love them.

Prince Charles and Lady Diana most certainly had unmet hopes in their “storybook” marriage—even though they had one of the most celebrated weddings of the century. Few could have imagined the painful outcome years later. Robert Runcie, Archbishop of Canterbury, however, probably did. He gave a marvelous homily at their wedding. In it he said: “Here is the stuff of which fairy tales are made, the prince and princess on their wedding day. But fairy tales usually end at this point with the simple phrase, ‘They lived happily ever after.’ This may be because fairy tales regard marriage as an anticlimax after the romance of courtship. This is not the Christian view. Our faith sees the wedding day not as a place of arrival but the place where the adventure begins.”

Too bad the royal couple didn’t act on Runcie’s message. Too bad we, also, settle for myths and fairy tales when we could be living a real-life adventure.

Exercise 4: Exploring Unfinished Business

Marriage is not a cure-all for problems. But it can, with time, become an agent of healing, fostering psychological and spiritual growth. The workbook exercise *Exploring Unfinished Business* will help you begin your healing journey together.

Myth Four: “My Spouse Will Make Me Whole”

The old saying “opposites attract” is based on the phenomenon that many individuals are drawn to people who complement them—who are good at things that they are not, who complete them in some way.

The book of Proverbs says, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”⁷ Our incompleteness and differences give iron its roughness, its sharpening power. Marriage is a God-given way to improve and hone our beings. Marriage challenges us to new heights

and calls us to be the best person possible, but neither marriage nor our partner will magically make us whole.

This myth usually begins with the belief that successful couples are “meant to be” and “made for each other.” We have counseled numerous people who, having difficulties in their marriage, felt they had chosen the wrong person to marry. If only they had chosen “Mr. Right” or “Ms. Right,” everything would have worked out. C’mon! It’s ludicrous to believe that successful marriages depend on discovering the one person out of the more than six billion people on this earth who is just right for you. If you are single, the fact that there is no “one and only” does not mitigate careful screening of prospective spouses. But if you are married and are complaining because your marriage partner does not make you instantly “complete,” that doesn’t necessarily mean that you married the wrong person.

The success of a marriage comes not in finding the “right” person, but in the ability of both partners to adjust to the real person they inevitably realize they married.

JOHN FISHER

Couples who swallow the myth that their spouse will make them whole become dependent on their partner in a way that is by all standards unhealthy. These couples cultivate what experts call an *enmeshed* relationship, characterized by a general reliance on their spouse for continual support, assurance, and wholeness. It is usually coupled with low self-esteem and a sense of inferiority that is easily controlled by their partner.

Dependent partners desire happiness, not personal growth. They are not interested in nourishing the relationship but in being nourished by their partner. They believe the lie that says they will effortlessly be made whole simply by being married.

The opposite of an enmeshed marriage is a relationship of rugged self-reliance, often called the *disengaged* relationship. The term reflects the isolation and independence of spouses who are attempting to earn their sense of wholeness by relying on no one, even their

marriage partner. These people, too, are trying in vain to compensate for their feelings of inferiority.

A sense of wholeness can never be achieved either in an enmeshed or in a disengaged relationship. Both are deeply flawed and dangerous. Instead, wholeness is found in an *interdependent* relationship, in which two people with self-respect and dignity make a commitment to nurture their own spiritual growth, as well as their partner's.

These relationships are also known as A-frame (dependent), H-frame (independent), and M-frame (interdependent) relationships.⁸

A H M

A-frame relationships are symbolized by the capital letter *A*. Partners have a strong couple identity but very little individual self-esteem. They think of themselves as a unit rather than as separate individuals. Like the long lines in the letter *A*, they lean on one another. The relationship is structured so that if one lets go, the other falls. And that is exactly what happens when one partner outgrows his or her dependency needs.

H-frame relationships are structured like a capital *H*. Partners stand virtually alone, each self-sufficient and neither influenced much by the other. There is little or no couple identity and little emotional connection. If one lets go, the other hardly feels a thing.

M-frame relationships rest on interdependence. Each partner has high self-esteem and is committed to helping the other partner grow. They could stand on their own, but they *choose* to be together. The relationship involves mutual influence and emotional support. M-frame relationships exhibit a meaningful couple identity. If one lets go, the other feels a loss but recovers balance.

Like separate strings of a lute that quiver with the same music, there is beauty in a marriage that respects the individuality of its partners. In an interdependent marriage, joy is doubled, and sorrow is cut in half.

Exercise 5: Assessing Your Self-Image

Louis K. Anspacher said, “Marriage is that relation between man and woman in which the independence is equal, the dependence mutual, and the obligation reciprocal.” The workbook exercise *Assessing Your Self-Image* will help you construct an interdependent and fulfilling relationship.

A Final Word on Marital Myths

The goal of this chapter has been to help you dismantle four common and harmful marital myths: (1) “We expect exactly the same things from marriage”; (2) “Everything good in our relationship will get better”; (3) “Everything bad in my life will disappear”; and (4) “My spouse will make me whole.” If you are discouraged by having held such fables as truth, take heart. Everyone enters marriage believing these falsehoods to some degree. And every successful marriage patiently works to challenge and debunk these myths.

In biblical times, the special status of “bride and groom” lasted a full year. “If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married.”⁹ The beginning of marriage was a time of learning and adapting. It still is. So allow yourself the same luxury.

*The bonds of matrimony
are like any other bonds,
they mature slowly.*

PETER DE VRIES

For Reflection

1. With your partner, discuss the expectations you have of your life together. What unspoken values or expectations do each of you bring to your partnership? In what ways might they influence the quality of your marriage?
2. What three important things did you give up or will you have to give up to be married? Have you grieved that loss? What is the positive trade-off for you?
3. How do dating couples build façades? What did you do, intentionally or not, to create an unrealistically positive impression of your partner? When did disillusionment set in?
4. How important is “loving yourself” when it comes to loving your spouse? Is there a correlation?
5. What do you think of the idea that marriage can be a therapeutic healing agent? In what areas in your life do you feel that you need healing? How could your spouse help you in those areas?
6. At what point does relational dependency become unhealthy? What about relational independence? How do you know whether or not you are experiencing interdependency in marriage?