



Critical Issues That Get in the Way of Healthy Marriages

Here Are Some Common Pitfalls that Couples Stumble Into

Competitiveness Does More Damage than You Realize

Two adults move into life as independent persons. They find each other. Love blossoms. A fairy-tale wedding takes place, with vows to partner and to support one another. They intend well. Then, having taken on a “roommate for life” they begin to keep score. *We got the color car you wanted. Well I have to see your parents more than I get to see mine. Hey, we always take the kind of vacation YOU like.* And, by then both are trying to “fix” the other. You know, smooth off those rough edges they knew were there—but they weren’t a big enough deal not to get married. Now we’re into the silent game of *I’m tired of you bossing me. Or, I’m going to get my way this time!* Missional couples see the damage that competitiveness can do. They address the insecurities and annoyances. They come to the agreement that competition or rivalry hurts a marriage. Being the presence of Christ means wanting to forge a marital culture where neither of you feels like a rival. Do this work early and often. Stave off the damage of competitiveness. Get help if you need!

Consumerism Shapes More than Just How you Spend your Money!

America transformed toward a “consumer” culture as the economy kicked into gear after World War II. A few generations later this silent, shaping force in our lives has us all thinking as consumers. Some try to do church as consumers of a spiritual body’s goods and services. Some try to do careers as consumers of what the companies “owe” the workers. Yes, all too many approach marriage unwittingly shaped as consumers too. This bent toward your partner needing to fit into YOUR patterns, preferences, biases, schedule or wants is obviously imbalanced. When you exchanged vows, you both signed a figurative “waiver” on the Universe getting to revolve around either of you! Yet that’s how some people attempt to live as married partners. Self-awareness is the starting place. Open dialogue with your partner may be a need. Managing your self, and both partners holding each other mutually accountable, may be a key. Married partners give—and take. Are you doing a healthy amount of both?

Lack of Creativity

You’ll read elsewhere in these **Marriage Helps** that “creativity” is a key to nurturing healthy romance. So it is. But the need for creativity applies far broader than just in the area of romance. Couples sometimes to forget to muster all the creativity they can call upon when resolving conflict. Or trying to make a tough decision. Taking the time to brainstorm may be your best action when working on a household management challenge that has you befuddled. But couples just get so busy! And the mentality is that they just need to work harder or faster. Taking the time and effort to listen and to work together “creatively” may be more important than just getting something done! Creativity takes time. Creativity takes intentional planning at times. Isn’t that ironic? The pay-off comes when you do something different or better.

Missing some Skill Sets for Conflict Resolution, Pattern-Breaking and Decision Making

The business-world got this one right: the definition of insanity really *CAN be doing the same thing over and*

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over, yet expecting different results. Here's another business world saying: *if the only thing you carry in your toolbox is a hammer, then every problem begins to look like a nail.* Every couple I work with in marriage tune-up or in pre-marital counseling has to do a homework session in conflict resolution. There are specific communication, management and partnering skills needed to work together in the challenges of life. It's not enough to just talk. Your talking has to involve intentional creativity, negotiation, brainstorming and a shared set of clear values in order to sometimes unlock the heaviest problems. Many couples arrive at marriage ill-equipped to do these. Another **Marriage Helps** page speaks to this in more detail.

Inattention to Romance

A previous **Marriage Helps** page speaks to some essentials of Romance. Here, let's do our duty in naming this issue as a critical one that too many couples let go of. The reasons are many: *we had kids, our careers are so demanding, our relationship has matured beyond all that.* Some simply say, *There's just no time.* Guess what? Everybody still wants to feel special in the eyes of their spouse. Neglect of romance leads to the opposite. Most couples don't set out to lose their "spark". They just let this happen over time. Don't! Take back your right to romance as a couple. Figure out what you need from each other. Hold your partner up as important enough to invest the effort. If you both try, you both win!

Knowing your Personality Type as a Couple

This one's a little murky. I've become convinced that it helps for married persons to know about their "personality type" as a couple. We know that individuals have unique personalities. But do you really know who you are as a couple? As a unit, you have capabilities and limitations. You have biases and habits. You have priorities and missions that are unique to you as a two-some. This kind of self-awareness might help you to hone your vision, achieve what you want to achieve and to not set yourselves up for so much disappointment. We observed a couple on a recent cruise. Everywhere we came across them, we couldn't take our eyes off them. We found them absolutely fascinating...because they were so starkly different from us as a pair!

Loss of "Want-to"

This one comes almost last because this critical issue is where I find couples in deep trouble! When you damage your relationship, or find you have pushed each other away, you can lose the "want-to" that is needed to do the healthy work of marriage. In our culture, we often refer to this as "we grew apart." The sense that you didn't set out to watch your marriage dissolve, but now you just don't have the emotional energy it would take to try. And, it does take two of you to try! Couples have to work at their marriages ahead of arriving in this state. In a healthy relationship, you view your spouse as someone worth the effort. And you hold your marriage in that level of priority. In an un-healthy relationship, quite honestly you just find it hard to muster the will to start something new. Or, to revive an old habit that once worked quite well for the two of you. This sense of "want-to" is a great part of what's at stake in your enrichment work.

Loss of Trust

Similar to "want-to", a loss of trust can eventually happen in a damaged relationship. And the work of a healthy marriage assumes that both partners trust each other. When you betray your partner's trust by violating key intimacies, you do lasting damage. When you disrespect each other, try to control or run-over each other, you damage trust. I tell my couples that when they fight, it's never JUST about what they're fighting over. I would argue that EVEN more importantly, they are banking or burning valuable personal capital with each other. Yes, you can disagree agreeably! When you do, you teach each other about what you can depend on.

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