

The planning of a Marriage

The next time someone admonishes you saying that you are "too picky," say "thank you" and appreciate the complement.

We are a society that spends far more time planning our weddings than on planning our marriages. I have to wonder if this is still news to anyone. Even if we have not heard it said in this precise way, I imagine the conclusion is easily arrived at by process of deduction. Our rather grim statistics on the failure rate of marriages attest to the fact that we need help with creating and maintaining successful long-term relationships. Somewhere along the line we missed the training on how to plan for a lifetime with another.

Even if we have heard all the rumblings, though, are we truly listening? Do we clearly understand what it means to plan for a marriage? If we indeed are paying attention and do understand then what are we doing about it? If you are already married, perhaps all you can do is to gain insight into how you made your decision to marry. Awareness is always the first step to some type of correction, if only to allow us acceptance of what is.

This is not to say that we might condone what Sam R. Hamburg calls "satisficing," the sort of "good enough" attitude that precludes the possibility for "optimizing," which he defines as having a clear sense of what we are looking for (*Will Our Love Last? A Couple's Road Map, 2000*). But perhaps we can begin to look at what we have differently. The status quo serves a purpose, was and perhaps still is or can be good. If you remain there, make a conscious choice to do it with a refreshed and positive attitude. But if you are starting over or are still very young and meaning to do it right the first time, listen up. There is help, there are resources. and it is incumbent upon you to get it right for yourself and your prospective partner.

"...a marriage should take place when both partners accept each other's differences and feel that a foundation has been established to deal with those differences in the future."

-Corey Donaldson

Naturally, researchers have long been busily attempting to shed light on what we can do to save ourselves from a negative

experience in marriage. Recently, I read a book called *Don't You Dare Get Married Until You Read This! (2000)* by Corey Donaldson just because I was attracted by the name and curious about what someone who decided on such a brazen title might have to say on the subject. In the book, Donaldson provides "more than 500 points to ponder" and after he justifies his work with some statistical data and his own personal story, he tells us that "Divorce is ...punishment for not preparing before the marriage took place."

The way to optimize your decisions about whom to marry is to have a clear sense of how you and your partner compare on each of the dimensions of compatibility."

-Sam R. Hamburg

At least a part of the lack of education or miseducation on the subject of what makes a marriage happy can be traced to the therapeutic community, says Sam R. Hamburg. We have all heard that it is good communication, improved and effective communication that accounts for a couple's being able to resolve conflicts that devastate a marriage. These therapists would have been operating under the fallible belief that both the cause and cure for all kinds of psychological problems was communication. But this is far too simplistic, according to Hamburg. Individuals very skilled in communication are not under-represented in divorce statistics.

He also dispels the notion that commitment and hard work make a good marriage and tells us that it is only in understanding who we are first and then who our intended partner is and how compatible you are as a couple that provides adequate "fuel" to make love last. Romantic love, according to Hamburg, does not last. We need to achieve "lasting love" and that requires compatibility that brings not only commitment but what he calls "devotion."

I have long been a proponent of psychological assessment that helps provide descriptive information about our unique needs to allow us a clearer understanding for making better choices, so Hamburg's work resonated with

my beliefs. And I liked what he said about incompatibility being the result of two people not being able to know and understand what it is like to be the other person and therein lies the problem. Hamburg gives three very clear areas prospective couples need to be concerned with and provides tests in his book to help ascertain whether they are adequately compatible in what he terms the "Practical, Sexual and Wavelength Dimensions."

Hamburg's tests encompass a great deal of territory- for example, the practical dimension is about agreement on the everyday stuff that makes life together easier. The sexual dimension has to do with agreement on what is interesting, comfortable, and an acceptable level of frequency. But it is the "wavelength" dimension that probably is the crucial matter; Hamburg describing it as similarity in outlooks, beliefs, and attitudes. I paraphrase this as sharing in a similar philosophy of life that sustains the friendship because we "get it" with each other.

Friendship fuels the flames of romance because it offers the best protection against feeling adversarial toward your spouse.

-John M. Gottman, Ph.D,

I could not leave this subject without mention of Dr. John Gottman's unprecedented scientific research. In a book that updates his longevity research on what makes a successful marriage, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work (1999)*, Gottman and Nan Silver join Hamburg in dispelling the good communication myth, specifically active listening and conflict resolution in successful marriages, along with other erroneous assumptions about what makes marriage work.

Gottman's has been conducting longevity research since 1972, and today is following 700 couples in seven different studies, attempting to determine the common factors that appear to be consistent in those who are happily married. He has decided on seven, and those include things like truly knowing one another; nurturing fondness and admiration, which are about honoring and respecting one another; maintaining the sort of friendship that disallows taking each other for granted; sharing power; having the "good manners" to compromise and tolerate; respecting one another's dreams; and the creation of what he calls "shared meaning." Gottman and Silver also provide exercises for individuals and couples to work through in their book that will help drive home the points behind his seven principles.

This is important work, allowing Dr. Gottman to take the audacious step in claiming an ability to "predict divorce with 91 percent accuracy ...after listening to the couple interact ...for as little as five minutes."

Gottman takes advantage of a banking analogy to drive home points that raise our awareness about how our responses may lead to "deposits" instead of withdrawals to the quality of our marriages. He provides techniques and valuable information on how to re-structure our thinking that will lead to a modification in our behavior that will get and keep our relationships "on course."

Although Dr. Gottman's work is obviously about once we take the step to marry, I think it is important that we understand the importance of planning-and that begins with knowing ourselves and the other person first.

Before we decide to walk down that aisle, claiming to ourselves and the world that we have chosen a partner with whom we will live happily ever-after, we ought to be able to know-intimately-what our needs are, what theirs are, and how compatible the two are. If not, we might enter into a situation where we find ourselves in a "good enough" or outright unhappy place. We deserve much more than that.

So if anyone says to you "When are you going to get married/remarried, it is time!" tell them that you are taking whatever time is necessary and that you alone will know when it is right.

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With over fifteen years of experience in counseling, Dolah Saleh is also the author of Dating and the Pursuit of Happiness (available at www.amazon.com).