

THE TEN ITEMS YOU SHOULD DISCUSS BEFORE MARRIAGE

Nagging one another is just another way of telling someone “I don’t really love you the way you are,” or “I’m so much better than you.”

She: “It just isn’t fair! I work all day, eight hours, just like you. Then I have to come home and cook dinner, do the dishes and the laundry, clean the house and still be all smiles when it’s bed time.” He: “I just don’t understand you. You said you wanted to keep working after we were married.”

Before they were married, this couple was confident they had settled the question of whether or not she would work. But evidently the discussion didn’t go far enough. She assumed if she were to keep working, he would help with the household chores. To him it was just as obvious that wives always do the housework whether they have other jobs or not.

Few newly married couples escape this kind of conflict. They may not clash over housework. Maybe it’s children: “Sure I said I wanted kids - but two, not 10!” Or in-laws: “When are we going to see my family if we go to your parents’ house for dinner every Sunday?” Or money: “I wish I had known that living on a budget meant that I could buy only one new dress a year.”

“I wish I had known,” Of course, it’s impossible for engaged couples - or for any two people - ever to know everything about each other. And the merging of two lives that have been separate for 20 or 30 years or more is always going to involve some conflicts and adjustments no matter how well the couple claims they know each other.

Actually there were probably potential trouble spots in their relationship all along - things the couple was unaware of, overlooked or simply ignored. In the hectic months before the wedding, concerns about china, silverware, wedding attire and what to serve at the reception can easily take priority over concerns about money, children and housework. Those things, it seems, will work themselves out later. But if they romantically assume that love always conquers all, they are wrong.

In the face of high divorce rates and the real challenges of married life, many dioceses have programs to help couples prepare for marriage and come to understand each other better - along with their strong points and weak points.

The list below, taken from several marriage preparation programs, pinpoints 10 areas that need to be discussed by couples planning to spend their future together. Exploring these questions before marriage helps reduce the problems that can arise afterwards.

1. **MARRIAGE - WHO, WHAT AND WHY?** It’s hard to get engaged without talking about marriage. But the discussion shouldn’t end with “Will you marry me?” Couples should also ask themselves and each other why they want to get married. There’s probably no one right answer to this question, but there are a lot of wrong ones; to escape a bad situation at home, for example. Or for financial security or because no one else is likely to ask. Even pregnancy - “having to get married” - is no longer considered sufficient reason for marriage in the Church, especially if the couple is very young or their relationship isn’t strong. Attitudes toward marriage are important, too, especially in light of society’s confused notions about what a marriage should be. Is it a permanent commitment, or something that can be easily gotten out of if things, “just don’t work out” or if one of the partners “just doesn’t want to be married anymore”? Is it a partnership, a dictatorship? Does one partner expect to be taken care of by the other?

2. **WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE ARE YOU?** By talking frankly about their perceptions of themselves and each other has actually brought many couples closer together. It's a joy to discover that someone thinks you're exceptionally patient, generous and a good listener - qualities you may have recognized in yourself. It's also nice to know that someone loves you even if he does think you're obnoxious at parties. What does one partner like/dislike about the other? Those who say they don't dislike anything don't know each other very well or aren't seeing each other as they really are - or they aren't telling the truth. In a dating situation it may be possible for her to keep to herself her opinion that he has terrible taste in clothes, and for him to hide his irritation at her constant lateness. Once the couple is seeing each other on a 24-hour-a-day basis, however, those negative feelings are bound to surface. On the other hand, if one partner is continually pointing out things he or she doesn't like about the other and badgering for change - a practice commonly referred to as nagging - the couple may be headed for trouble. Nagging is another way of telling someone, "I'm so much better than you" or "I don't really love you the way you are."
3. **WHO'S GOING TO DO THE DISHES?** Thirty years ago, being a wife meant cooking, cleaning, taking care of house and children. Being a husband meant being the breadwinner, disciplinarian and decision-maker. Today, however, that's not always the case. Husbands and wives are reexamining and redefining their roles. Really, who does what is irrelevant as long as both partners are satisfied. So it's a good idea for engaged couples to discuss such issues as whether they will both hold outside jobs and how household tasks will be divided. They should also decide whether one partner will be responsible for decisions about matters like investments, insurance, and whether to move across town or buy a new car, or whether those decisions will be shared.
4. **WHAT IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO YOUR FAMILIES?** Our families have a lot to do with our own expectations for marriage and family life. If his father never kissed his mother or showed affection for her in front of him, he may be uncomfortable with his wife's demand for affection. Some couples have had the opportunity to observe each other's families at close range. She knows that his father is a strict disciplinarian, that his mother is gentle and understanding, and that they encouraged their children to excel in sports. He knows that his family placed great emphasis on doing well in school and choosing a career, that dialogue was used more than punishment in handling infractions, and that the family took interesting and often expensive vacation every year. It's also a good idea for engaged couples to draw up some "ground rules" to follow with their families after the wedding. They should decide whether family members will be free to drop in at any time or are to wait for an invitation, and specify times at which they do not wish to be disturbed. An equitable arrangement for visiting and spending holidays with each family should also be determined.
5. **HOW WELL WILL YOU COMMUNICATE?** The open and honest communication and sharing of feelings is so essential to building an intimate relationship is sometimes difficult for engaged couples. They may fear, "If he/she really knew what I was like, he/she wouldn't love me anymore." Because it carries the possibility of rejection, revealing one's inmost self to another person is scary. But consider the alternative; a lifetime of conversations that go on rather than "How was your day?" or "What are we having for dinner?" That two people can spend their entire lives together and never really know each other is much more fighting. Knowing-and being known-intimately is worth the risk involved. So engaged couples should take a careful look at the quality of their communication. Do they enjoy talking with one another? Do they find each other easy to talk to, or are they uncomfortable when the conversation goes beyond surface topics? Can they share thoughts and feelings honestly without fear of ridicule or rejection? Does one partner try to manipulate the other through threats, tears or pouting? Do they know how to handle conflict and express anger in constructive ways?

6. **HOW DEPENDENT OR INDEPENDENT SHOULD YOU BE?** Some couples take the phrase, "And the two shall become one," literally. They go everywhere and do everything together. They remain glued to each other's sides at parties. Friends and hobbies they enjoyed separately before they were married are abandoned in favor of activities they can pursue as a couple. And the very idea that one might enjoy an evening away from the other's company is met with jealousy and hurt feelings. "You'd rather see a movie with Carol/go bowling with Richard than be with me?" Engaged couples need to be honest with each other about how much time they'd like to spend together and about things they'd like to do - alone- after they are married. Engaged couples also need to discuss how much freedom each will have with the opposite sex. If she has been having weekly lunches with a male friend, will he be disturbed if she continues? Will it bother her if he spends an entire evening at a party talking with a very attractive woman? Does "going out with the girls/guys" mean freedom to talk and dance with other men/women in bars or at parties? Jealousy is a very destructive force in any relationship, but it's bound to occur if a couple hasn't agreed upon limits for acceptable behavior.
7. **HOW SHOULD MONEY BE HANDLED?** "Before we were married," a friend confessed recently, "Bob and I were sure we'd have no trouble living on the money we made. It seemed like so much at the time-we didn't even bother to draw up a budget." But, she admits, "I guess we weren't very realistic about how much things cost. Now we're in debt, our rent is going up, and I don't know where we'll come up with the money." How much money does it take to live? A lot of engaged couples don't have any idea. Many have lived at home all or most of their lives and have little experience with rent, insurance, grocery, utility or doctor bills. And sometimes even those who have supported themselves for several years have trouble adjusting their spending habits to cover two people's expenses. The best way for an engaged couple to get an accurate picture of their financial status is to draw up a budget. Before they can do that, though, they have to find out realistic figures, what they can expect to pay for housing, food, clothing, utilities, insurance, medical care and so on. Then they can determine whether they'll have enough money to cover their expenses, and discuss whether adjustments- one of them finding a better job for instance- will have to be made. But that's not the end of the money discussion/ Who, for instance, is going to handle the money? Who will be responsible for seeing that bills are paid on time? Will savings and checking accounts be joint or separate? Will the couple have credit cards? How much can one spouse spend on a purchase without consulting the other? Will vacations, weekly movies and dinner out be considered a necessity or a luxury? What are the couple's financial goals (a house in five years, a new car, a trip to Europe)?
8. **WHAT ABOUT THE SEXUAL EXPRESSION OF LOVE?** Bob, who has been married for eight years, smilingly recalls his anticipation of his wedding night. "I was sure I was going to make love to Judy 11 or 12 times," he says. "I had it all planned. After each time I was going to put a mark on the wall above the bed-a real testimonial to my virility." But the next morning, he admits, there wasn't a single mark on the wall. "We were so exhausted after the wedding and reception, sleep was the only thing on our minds," Bob recalls. "But I ended up being glad we waited. There was much less tension when we were both rested and relaxed." Bob & Judy's experience isn't unusual. Many couples discover their wedding night is not romantic and passionate, but simply the tiring night of their lives-not exactly the optimum atmosphere for beginning a sexual relationship.

To avoid feelings of failure and disappointment, engaged couples should be prepared for the possibility that nothing will happen - and remember to keep a sense of humor about whatever occurs. But the wedding night is only the beginning of a lifelong sexual relationship, and engaged couples should share honestly with each other what they would like that relationship to be. How often does each expect to make love? Are there sexual practices either feels to be immoral or embarrassing? Does the couple find each other attractive and expect to be comfortable with each other without clothes? Will they feel free to discuss their likes and dislikes, offer constructive suggestions, try new things? Do both feel comfortable with the idea of initiating sex?

9. **WHAT ABOUT CHILDREN?** How many children does the couple want to have? If she wants two and he wants 10, can they reach some sort of compromise? How will one partner feel if the other, for serious emotional or physical reasons, decides he or she would rather not have children at all? Would the couple consider adoption if they are unable to have children? When would the couple like to start their family? If, for financial or other reasons, they'd like to postpone parenthood, what method of family planning will they use? Both partners must be comfortable with it. And since natural family planning methods, among others, require some preparation, it's important to settle this well in advance of the wedding. How will the couple feel if their chosen method fails and they are faced with an unplanned pregnancy? But having children is just the start. Who will care for them once they arrive? If both spouses were working, will one "retire" to stay home with the children, or would they prefer a baby-sitter or day-care center? What kind of discipline is the couple comfortable with? If he comes from a home where even minor infractions were punished with severe beatings, and she was never spanked a child, the time to arrive at a shared philosophy of discipline is not after little Johnny commits his first offense. Will the couple share equally in the task of disciplining children, or is one spouse to be responsible?

10. **HOW WILL YOU DEAL WITH SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF MARRIAGE?** For Catholics marriage is a sacrament and part of their life of faith. So engaged couples planning weddings in the Church should examine their reasons for doing so. How important is their faith to them? Do they intend to maintain active participation in the Church after the wedding? Or are they walking down the aisle instead of standing before a judge in the courthouse "just to please Mom and Dad"? Has the couple ever discussed religion, their image of God, their beliefs and their doubts, their feelings about prayer? What part does religion play in their lives? Couples of different denominations need to decide the best way they can practice their individual faiths and still share a faith-life together. And what about children? The Catholic party to the marriage promises to do what he or she can to assure the children are brought up Catholic. Is this agreeable to the non-Catholic party? How can children be taught respect and appreciation for both parents' faiths? A couple who has carefully discussed all these issues is probably well-prepared for marriage. Yet no list of questions is exhaustive. There will always be surprises in the ever-changing relationship called marriage. Couples need flexibility, willingness to grow and a sense of humor. These qualities, and an abundance of love, are the best preparation for marriage a couple can have.