

COMING MAY 15<sup>TH</sup>, 2015:

## Marriage in Modern Life: Why It Works, When It Works By Dr. Anne Brennan Malec, PsyD, LMFT

Marriage is a complex, ever-evolving relationship that challenges partners to remain active in their efforts to maintain the relationship. The lack of relationship education in our society deprives many couples of the opportunity to learn the skills required to maintain a successful long-term relationship. To help fill in the learning gap, I wrote my book to provide practical tools and delineate important relationship principles that will teach partners healthy skills to benefit their marriage.

Maintaining a healthy marriage requires continuous effort from both partners, and through my experience and education in couple therapy, I have compiled a list of practical guidelines for couples hoping to improve and sustain their relationship. While the components of a healthy relationship – passion, commitment, and intimacy – may seem abstract, I have found specific actions through my practice as a psychologist and marriage and family therapist that couples can do to prioritize their relationship and make it last.

As a preview for the upcoming release of Marriage in Modern Life on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015, here is a list of four major considerations for premarital couples and married partners interested in enhancing their modern marriage:

### 1. Continue or learn to **communicate well**.

We all know to be polite to our bosses at work or strangers we meet, but it is often with those that we are closest to that we slip into unhealthy habits of disrespect or inattentive listening. Most likely, at the point in your relationship when you plan to get married, you feel close and communicate well with your partner. It is over time that partners become busier, more distracted, or simply make fewer efforts to communicate respectfully and openly with their spouses – but this is a critical component to a healthy marriage.

Couples must schedule time to check in with each other on a daily and weekly basis. Make it a practice to meet in the family room every night at 9 PM to share with each other the events of the day. It may seem less necessary in the early years of your marriage, but trust me, you will appreciate the habit later on when work hours become longer and kids enter the picture. Schedule a regular weekly check-in to coordinate schedules, discuss upcoming financial issues, touch base about relationship concerns, and take some time for each other away from technological distractions (that means no phones or TV in the background).

### 2. **Create a budget agreement**.

One of the most common areas of struggle for newlyweds is managing a joint budget. Even if you cohabitate with your partner before marriage, it is unlikely that

you pool all of your resources, and there is a lack of education about shared budgets. But money is important for your personal and relational well-being. Talk with your partner about your financial goals and concerns. Your spouse should be an equal partner in financial decisions.

It is helpful for partners to regularly check in with each other about financial changes and decisions (you can easily incorporate this into your weekly check-ins). One way to limit conflict over spending is for the couple to agree upon a personal monthly budget, say \$500, which each partner can spend on individual expenses without consulting the other. Couples may also benefit from having an agreed-upon limit for family expenses (ex. \$200) that each partner will not exceed without consulting and getting agreement from the other. By forming healthy spending habits and open communication about finances, partners can avoid one of the most common areas of marital conflict and feel closer as equals.

### 3. Share responsibility for **actively maintaining intimacy**.

At the time of a marriage, sexual intimacy and emotional closeness is almost always thriving in the relationship. In the early years of a relationship, intimacy seems to come naturally, with many partners taking it for granted and assuming it will always be easy to sustain. Intimacy is not self-sustaining, it requires regular and frequent attention from both partners. Your relationship will reap rewards if you cultivate intimacy and keep tabs on ways the other partner wishes to feel loved and cared for (because this *does* vary from person to person and over time).

Date nights are a simple way to establish time to reconnect during a busy week, and they are essential in the early years of marriage and beyond. Take turns planning an evening for each other, and do not get trapped in thinking it has to be an extravagant affair. If your lives are incredibly busy that week, find a time to relax at home or try to cook a new meal together. Get creative in finding time to prioritize your partner.

### 4. Never be afraid to **manage your differences**.

If I had to pick one major takeaway for couples considering marriage, it is to ensure that you are able to tell your partner when you are upset with him or her so that your partner stands a chance at trying to fix the problem. Without this, resentment takes root and will continue to grow until it is addressed. Longstanding resentment is toxic to a marriage. It may sound basic, but it is often difficult for partners to place themselves in a vulnerable position where they can voice their concerns about the person closest to them. In order for couples to manage resentment, it is essential that partners create a safe conversational space where each can be heard and listen without feeling defensive or attacked.

It is inevitable that you will have a different perspective than your partner at some point – whether regarding the family budget, division of household labor, or even the right way to show intimacy. Use any and every opportunity in the early years of marriage to practice talking with each other when one partner is upset with the other. Skills like empathy, managing anger and frustration, and active listening can be learned and need to be regularly utilized in couple conversation.