

SCORING A PERFECT 1 IN YOUR MARRIAGE



How would you score your marriage?

A perfect marriage does not exist, but we can all work on building a thriving marriage with these five traits:
**communication, conflict resolution, time together,
intimacy and shared responsibility.**



FOCUS
ON
THE **FAMILY**®
Australia

THE PERFECT 1 MARRIAGE



Communication

Positive communication allows couples to become emotionally connected. Two individuals can understand each other better when they listen well and honestly express their needs, thoughts and feelings. Healthy couples communicate about daily matters and they have positive conversations that enrich their relationship.

How do you foster and promote this kind of dialogue and interaction in a marriage? Here are some ideas to keep in mind.

1. Vive la difference!

Marriage is supposed to be the place where the process of communion and "in-othering" takes place at the deepest and most intimate level. *Why should this be so?* **Firstly**, both of you are two different people who come from two different backgrounds. **Secondly**, you're also male and female – representatives of the two "halves" of humanity, two opposite genders. **Thirdly**, you can't read each other's minds. All too often you may find it difficult even to relate to each other's viewpoints. While you can't look into your spouse's soul, you can learn to know and be known intimately.

2. Enjoy the journey

Real communication is a journey – it's about walking humbly with each other. There are actually two types of communication used by people involved in a close relationship: **Work Talk** and **Heart Talk**. **Work Talk**, as the name suggests, is task-oriented. **Heart Talk** tries to go deeper. How do you do *Heart Talk*? It's primarily a matter of *caring* about the other person's feelings and taking turns as speaker and listener. We sum it up with an acronym: **ICU**. **First**, *identify (I)* your feelings and the feelings of your spouse. **Second**, decide to *care (C)* about those feelings. **Third**, seek to *understand (U)* those feelings with the assistance of your spouse. Then keep on talking and listening until *both* of you are satisfied with the results.

3. More than words

What is it that keeps so many husbands and wives from experiencing this kind of heart-to-heart connection? Somewhere along the line, both parties have bought into the idea that real communication occurs only when they understand each other's words, but as *Heart Talk* demonstrates very clearly, words are actually just the beginning.

Genuine two-in-one bonding only kicks into gear when we get behind mere words and drill down into the heart. Interpersonal communication involves openness and empathy – a willingness to enter into the thoughts and feelings of another, to weep when he/she weeps and to laugh when he/she laughs. That's because real communication is about knowing and being known from the inside out.

4. Stay curious

No matter how long you are married to your spouse, you will never completely grasp everything there is to know about them. This is why it's so important to stay curious. Spouses who stick together are good students of each other. They learn to ask questions instead of passing judgment. Rather than lashing out in anger when a spouse behaves in a puzzling way, they know how to say, "*Tell me what you're thinking*" or "*Help me understand why you reacted that way in that situation.*"

These couples feel an openness to share with each other on a heart-to-heart level. Not only are they comfortable talking about both facts *and* feelings, but they prioritise communication and schedule regular time to connect.

Discuss Together

- What are some practical steps we can take to foster more *Heart Talk* at the centre of our marriage?
- How can we become more intentional about resolving life's practical problems by means of *ICU*?

THE PERFECT MARRIAGE 1



Conflict Resolution

Every time you open the loop of conflict in your marriage – whether it is a major argument or just a minor difference of opinion – you stand at a fork in the road. Once an offence has led to hurt and hurt has turned to anger, you are faced with two choices. You can **1)** choose to resolve the conflict and close the loop, or **2)** choose not to resolve the conflict and leave an open loop.

These five common conflict-resolution styles will help you understand how your present style of responding to conflict may indeed hinder your efforts to close the loop:

1. The Winner

The people who use this style go into a marital conflict with one goal in mind—**winning**. They have a high need to control people and situations. The idea is to pull out all the stops and control others, making sure everything and everybody goes their way. It works well in difficult situations when someone needs to take charge and get a job done quickly. However, this is not the healthiest way to heal hurt and anger in a marriage.

2. The Persuader

Persuaders are often manipulative, working every angle to gain the advantage. They also have a high need to control their spouses. On the plus side, persuaders are more rational in the midst of a conflict, reasoning instead of dominating people and pushing them away. By manipulating people, persuaders may get their way in the short run, but this manipulation and ensuing resentment could seriously damage the relationship.

3. The Pushover

The pushovers are the *pleasers* of the world. They set aside their own needs and value the relationship above all else. They are not interested in controlling their spouse, which is healthy in most relationships. In conflict, however, they tend to give in and do what their spouse wants.

Consistently burying their own feelings, these people risk building up resentment below the surface. They may feel as if their spouse takes advantage of them, but they can't seem to build up enough strength to take a stand.

4. The Avoider

These people prefer to avoid conflict in marriage and family relationships. A nap sounds like a safer way to deal with interpersonal difficulties. When conflict arises, the avoiding spouse may leave the room, clam up, change the subject, or shut down emotionally. They have a low need to control their spouse. Total avoidance is unhealthy because it places such a low priority on the relationship.

5. The Resolver

The most effective approach to conflict in relationships is working toward a *resolution*. A resolver tries to cut through the games by striving for directness and honesty in the relationship. They will step up in a steady and mature manner to assert how important it is to value the relationship while confronting the issue.

The resolver exercises just the right balance between a healthy need to control and a healthy priority on relationships. They tend to hit the issues head-on and in a way that often opens the door to conflict resolution and a happy ending.

Discuss Together

- When we look back over the conflicts we have experienced in our marriage, which style have we employed most of the time?

THE PERFECT MARRIAGE 1



Time Together

Finding ways to sustain love involves spending enjoyable time together. Thriving couples build a strong friendship by continuing to date each other. They develop meaningful traditions, spend time with each other, laugh together, and look for adventure.

A healthy marriage has a good mixture of independence and togetherness, and intentionality about building their lives on a foundation of common values, interests and goals. There are at least four critical ingredients to the kind of togetherness that enables a marriage to thrive:

1. Regularity

Make together-time a priority and that requires *intentionality* – after all, talking and doing things together don't just "happen." It's so important to plan regular outings and date nights and do whatever it takes to make sure these engagements are faithfully kept. If you want time to share your hearts, your hopes, and your dreams with each other, you've got to *fight* for it.

2. Variety

Healthy, vibrant relationships require breathing space. They need the ebb and flow of independence and togetherness. The same effect can be achieved by changing up date plans from time to time. Don't get stuck in a rut. Think outside the box. Even if it means something as simple as eating at a different restaurant or going to a different movie theatre, it's important to keep things interesting by changing the pattern.

3. Adventure

Variety in its turn introduces a touch of adventure and excitement into a couple's together-time. An outing doesn't have to be big, dramatic, risky or outlandish in order to be adventurous. It simply has to include an element of *the new*, *the unusual* or *the unexpected*. The idea is to keep yourselves just a little bit off-balance so that you can benefit from the enriching experience of reacting to new things together.

4. Fun

Finally, when date nights are adventurous and exciting (even in understated ways) they're also fun. *This is essential*. Research shows that new activities activate the brain's reward system, creating excitement, exhilaration and joy. Couples who have fun together strengthen the bonds that unite them without even realising it. They do this by developing meaningful traditions and rituals characterised by laughter and playfulness.

Discuss Together

- If we were to come up with an idea for a really fun and adventurous outing, what would it be?
- What would you like to do that we've never done together before?

THE PERFECT MARRIAGE 1



Intimacy

Mutually satisfying physical intimacy involves the recognition that sex is one of the best, if not the best, gifts to a married couple. In a strong, healthy marriage, the spouses don't regard sex as a *chore* or an *obligation*. Instead, they see it as a delightful *dance* in which each spouse puts the other's needs and interests ahead of his/her own and explores ways of giving sexually to the other. Here are a few of the most important steps that define the basic choreography of this marvellous dance.

1. Laying the foundation

We begin with the assumption that sex and sexuality really do matter. They are fundamental to the whole meaning of the marital relationship. Sexual union is vital to the process of togetherness and is to be enjoyed to the fullest within marriage. Furthermore, husbands and wives are to guard their "marriage bed" by being faithful to each other. Sexual infidelity is an enormous betrayal to your spouse and is one of the most destructive forces in a marriage.

2. Priming the pump

In a number of subtle and not-so-subtle ways, our culture tries to persuade us that sex is most potent when most isolated from the rest of our day-to-day experience. The truth is that sex is all about knowing the other person inside out and in all kinds of contexts. You have to prime the pump of passion by keeping the full-fledged romance alive at the centre of your relationship. You can do this through date nights, candlelit dinners and generous amounts of heart-to-heart conversation.

3. "In-othering"

Love your spouse as you love yourself – this is the real secret behind romantic love between the sexes and the physical bond in which it finds consummation. We call it the mystery of "*in-othering*" or "*co-inherence*." It's the marvel of "me in you" and "you in me." This term encapsulates perfectly how a love affair grows into a genuine marriage, and how a genuine marriage is transformed into a way of the soul. Two bodies melding into one, two souls locked in a tight embrace.

4. Keeping it in context

Deeply meaningful sex is a lot like a wedding cake. It's something you build layer by layer. You start at the most basic level and work your way up. You initiate a connection in a small and simple way, then maintain it, and elaborate on it as you move forward. The act of intercourse could be compared to the icing on the cake. It's the finishing touch you put on a painting that you've laboured long and painstakingly to get just right.

Discuss Together

- What are some ways we can get to know each other better, build intimacy and engage in simple affectionate contact throughout the coming week?

THE PERFECT MARRIAGE 1



Shared Responsibility

Sharing responsibilities means being on the same team. Thriving couples recognise their unique roles and abilities and work together to manage every day responsibilities. They put in effort towards reaching a consensus on the question of household chores so that both spouses feel satisfied with the distribution of responsibility. By way of contrast, when you consistently feel as if you are in a never-ending battle over household responsibilities and roles, your relationship will begin to feel hostile. *How do you avoid that kind of disaster?* Here are a few ideas.

1. Define the problem

Today, many husbands and wives perceive the allotment of housework as unfair and end up in conflict. The problem is complicated by the fact that even in modern times, it's still common to think in terms of "male" and "female" chores – that women should cook and clean while men calculate the budget and finances. This can lead to problems if unspoken assumptions and misunderstandings are allowed to explode in anger and arguments over the sharing of household tasks. Recognising and exposing the sources of this conflict is the first step towards a solution.

2. "Into Me, See"

Have you heard about the other way of writing the word *intimacy*? It's "*into me, see*." For modern married couples, a fair and mutually satisfactory plan for dividing up household chores begins with mutual understanding. It's a matter of really knowing your spouse inside out, learning about his/her special gifts and talents, finding out what makes him/her tick, and discovering what the other really enjoys doing. The more a man and woman understands and accepts their role, the less they have to hassle over *who cooks dinner* and *who takes out the rubbish*. And it's at that point that the marriage really begins to work.

3. Lay it on the table

By this point it should be obvious that this is another one of those areas in marriage where good communication is absolutely essential. If you can be flexible enough to allow for exceptions to accepted "rules" and work out a division of labour that places more emphasis upon giftedness rather than gender, you'll discover that it is possible to negotiate a plan that's agreeable to both spouses. If you want to work together as a team, you have to begin by discussing these differences and achieving some kind of an agreement.

4. Create your own rules

Couples with vibrant and successful relationships tend to be those who have found mutually satisfactory ways of settling the "chore wars" between themselves. These spouses pay little attention to the norms of contemporary society or the expectations of family and friends. Instead, they make it their goal to function as a unit.

They understand that the only thing that matters is how they work together, not what other people think. By means of discussion, negotiation, and written agreements, they hammer out a plan that preserves fairness and equity in the way that defines roles and divides household tasks and responsibilities.

Discuss Together

- Let's talk about our spousal roles and responsibilities.
- Do we feel like these roles play to our individual strengths in marriage?

FamilyCast

Sign up now to stream on demand content to strengthen your family relationships and see them thrive!



families.org.au

Ph 1300 300 361

Email response@families.org.au

© 2022 Focus on the Family. Originally published at focusonthefamily.com. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

