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Strengthening the Couple Relationship

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After a couple has been married for a number of years, there seems to be a lack of individual artistry and creativity in the relationship. Each person becomes involved in a routine of relating to the other in a certain way. Patterns develop because of living in the same house and responding to children's needs. Couples develop certain habitual work patterns, see the same people socially, etc. The same ways of relating and behaving may persist, unchallenged and unchanged, for years. The behavior will continue long after it has ceased to produce delight, zest or growth. Therefore, the most destructive of the "four horsemen of the apocalypse" of marriage sets in--BOREDOM!

In principle, each couple has the possibility of recreating their marriage at every moment of their waking life. The couple is like a sculptor in the construction and shaping of their marriage. Given the limitations of one's imagination, courage and skills, the sculptor has many degrees of freedom to create the form of the marriage. The sculptor confronts a heap of clay, imagines a pleasing form, and sets about creating a structure. The sculptor may create several approximations before creating one that will "work."

The couple can likewise recreate, reframe, or renew a relationship, but it is a difficult venture. The sculpting is compounded in marriage because there are two persons with two different perceptions of the relationship. There are two sets of needs to be considered and two sets of expectations which are involved. It is possible for two people of good will to discuss their future possibilities together, and to reconcile differences that arise. It is also possible for a couple to realize a greater amount of their marriage potential. What seems to thwart this kind of interpersonal creativity is 1) failure in imagination on the part of either partner; 2) fear of external criticism and sanctions; 3) fear of change in oneself; and 4) the fear of conflict itself.

We make fantastic demands on our marriages today. When a man and a woman join together in the mutual adventure through life, both individuals and the marriage are subjected to fierce strains; yet, in most cases, they give marriage only "left-over time."

When we wake up in the morning and are fresh, we go immediately to work--in the fields, or at our job, or at home. At the end of the day when we are exhausted and every bit of usefulness has been wrung out of us, we rush out onto the crowded expressway and slowly make our way home. There, late in the evening at the low point of our energy, we pick up with our marriage. Then we ask it to "recharge" us enough so that the next morning we can again return to the work-world at our best.

In this kind of society, most of us just take from our marriage--very few of us feed it. So we shouldn't be surprised at the 40 percent divorce rate for first marrieds today. . . the marriage dies of malnutrition. Yet, modern men and women who are intelligent, articulate, efficient and successful in work, obviously can do better in the most personal of all relationships--marriage. Marriage ought to foster the growth of authentic love between man and woman. This love should evolve as a mixture of greater humanness between the partners (also called friendship) and a meaningful sexual relationship, based on respect, trust and compassion. This deep and meaningful love is devoted to the welfare of each other.

Marital love means "caring for" rather than "taking care of" or "taking." Mutual understanding and consideration nourishes the marriage. It becomes possible for the marriage to be sustained and sustaining even when the couple feels low or the energy drain is high.

Components of a Satisfying Marriage

What can married couples *do* to keep their marriage satisfactory for both partners? How can they strengthen the bondedness between them? What necessary components provide a maintenance guide for couples who want to keep their marriages in working order? Some of them are:

1. **TRUST.** Trust is usually built on mutual respect and acceptance of differentness. Developing a sense of trust means that both persons will do what they say they will do, and will not do and say things that violate the integrity of the relationship.
2. **COMMITMENT.** This is vital to a marriage. When it is taken for granted, vitality can disappear from the relationship. If a spouse uses the commitment "so long as we both shall live" as an excuse to quit working at the marriage, it will not live as long as the individuals. Once a couple commits themselves to the adventure of married life, this commitment will help them walk in the valleys and face crises as well as climb to the mountaintop together.
3. **SKILLS.** Marriage as a lifetime process demands that both partners be skillful at understanding others, expressing needs, listening to each other, making decisions, negotiating and managing conflict and having meaningful communication. Also, someone needs to know how to earn a living, how to cook, how to care for the house, and how to parent.
4. **CARING.** Nurturant love exists when, meeting the needs of your partner is just as important as having your own needs met. Caring means being supportive of each individual's growth and personal interests as well as caring for the relationship as well.
5. **RECIPROCITY.** "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This means exchanging positive rewards and "strokes" with each other. It means avoiding those experiences which may hurt your partner and have an extremely detrimental effect on your relationship. It involves "meshing" of the various roles in the relationship and helping each other as each fulfills these roles.
6. **EFFORT.** All the trust, commitment, skills, and caring are not very productive without effort.

Effort means taking time to work on your marriage. It means being willing to work together to develop a mutually satisfying relationship. It means participating in marital growth experiences to expand and enhance the relationship.

7. **EXPECTATIONS.** One reason for marital dissatisfaction is that couples expect a great deal from marriage. Wives and husbands often have unrealistic expectations about what marriage should provide them. Most people expect their spouse to be a source of emotional support, companionship, sexual satisfaction, and economic support or assistance. That's a pretty big order! The gap between expectation and perceived performance produces disappointment, discouragement and finally, disillusionment.

Marriage Enrichment Plan

Enriching and strengthening your marriage involves learning to share with each other at deeper levels. The idea is to become more intimate through mutual self-disclosure and acceptance. The process is risky--and it takes time. Therefore, it is recommended that you agree together to become involved in a daily marriage enrichment experience by spending time in communication with each other. A commitment on the part of each of you to try a program together may keep you going when you get busy or feel a little afraid and are tempted to quit.

The following are some helpful hints to assist you in sharing together each day:

- Set aside a certain time each day--a time which will be relatively free of distraction. But make it "prime time," not "left-over time."
- Share positive thoughts, feelings, and wants only. This is *not* a time to complain or debate.
- Emphasize the sharing of feelings (joy, hurt, irritation, pleasure). This is not an exercise in reasoning or evaluation and judgment.
- Speak for yourself. Say "I feel"; "I want..."; "I think..."; "I like...". Don't say "you..." or "people...".
- Use language that expresses appreciation ("I appreciate it when you..."). Provide positive feedback and avoid "constructive" criticism.
- Have a "time-out" rule. Whenever either partner feels like s/he does not want to continue the discussion, s/he may say "time-out." You each agree to take a break or change the subject without asking why the other does not wish to continue. Knowing that this option is available will keep you from feeling trapped. You are more likely to share if you can decide when and how quickly to share.
- Learn to listen! Try to understand what your partner is saying--what s/he means. Put your understanding of what you heard in your own words and say it back to the speaker to see if you accurately received the message sent. Remember, "when in doubt, check it out!"

A Final Word

A word of caution: Marriage enrichment is not the same as marriage counseling. It is the process of "making a good marriage better." Should you find your marriage in trouble, you are advised to seek marital therapy to get the foundation of your marriage restored.

Marriage is not an answer, it is a search. It is a relationship within which change is generated by relating and living together. It can produce growth, identity and a sense of rootedness. But if it is not going to become a trap, and if you are going to defy the 20th century by staying married, you will need to renew and enrich your relationship, again and again and again.

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