

Envisioning Your Future

In my counseling practice, I work with couples in all stages of life. I see engaged couples and married couples who are struggling with their relationships. Very often these men and women want very different things out of life. I see men who are driven to create brilliant careers married to women who just want them home with the family. I see women bent on building their dream houses married to men who want to take it easy on the weekends. I see social butterflies married to homebodies. They are disappointed that their dreams are not coming true, and they have fallen into the habit of criticizing the dreams of their spouses.

How many of these couples do you think talked about their life goals before they got married? How many devoted time to envisioning their future? If you guessed, "Not many," you'd be exactly right.

With 20/20 hindsight, they can see that this was a big mistake. Inevitably they say they wish they had talked openly about what they wanted and how they would get it at the beginning.

You don't have to wait for 20/20 hindsight. You can benefit from the experience of couples who have gone before you. You can start talking with your fiancé right away about what you want out of life.

You can, but you may not. I'm well aware that once the wedding momentum takes off, it can be hard to focus on life after the wedding, even though you know how important it is. I'm also aware that you've probably already heard the advice I'm giving you—from books, your parents, perhaps your pastor. Rather than tell you what you should be doing—again—I'm going to help you understand the reasons why you may be putting off those crucial discussions. I'm also going to give you some tips for getting around those reasons. With more awareness of what's stopping you and some ideas for getting started, it will be easier for you to have the necessary conversations about your future.

Reason #1: "I can barely keep up with everything I have to do now."

Remedy: Enlist the help of your fiancé, your mother, or a trusted friend—anyone who's good at keeping things in perspective. Ask him/her to help you do a reality check on your wedding to-do list. First, divide your list into critical tasks, such as reserving a hall, and optional tasks, such as making your own favors. If you're like many brides, many optional tasks have started to seem like absolutely essential tasks. That's why you need another pair of eyes to help you see the difference. Tell your helper to be tough! Most likely, you can eliminate 20% of the items on your to-do list; no one will know the difference, and you still will have a beautiful wedding.

Make a timetable for the critical tasks. Then get them out of your head and into your calendar, just as you do at work. One excellent way of getting them out of your head is to delegate. Most likely you have friends or family that would be honored to be in charge of part of your wedding.

While you've got your calendar out, schedule some down time. This could be a date with your fiancé, a walk, a pedicure—the only rule is there is no wedding talk allowed. You may find it hard at first, but stick with it. A break from wedding

planning will slow your mind down and make you feel more ready to talk about emotional topics.

Reason #2: "I'm afraid we might find out that our goals are incompatible."

Remedy: Realize that compatibility isn't usually a question of black and white. Most couples have some important goals that they disagree on. The success of your marriage doesn't depend on agreeing on everything. It depends on learning to communicate respectfully about your differences and committing to approaching your differences with creativity and an open mind. The earlier you start talking, the sooner you will learn these skills.

Of course, there are some issues of compatibility that are black and white. For example, if you want children and your fiancé doesn't, all the creativity in the world will not satisfy both of your needs. If you find you have such a conflict, it will take courage to face the truth. Realize that you do have that courage inside you. Your courage actually will grow stronger if you seriously commit yourself to accepting the truth.

Reason #3: "I believe love will conquer all. Things will fall into place as time goes on."

Remedy: At a conscious level, we all know this is not true. But somewhere deep inside, we may be hanging on to this belief. Get through to your inner self by doing some field research. Talk to older married couples you know. Ask them about the ups and downs of their marriages and how they got through the challenging times. Hearing about their struggles and successes first-hand will help you grasp in a deeper way what it really takes to make marriage work from day to day.

Reason #4: "When we talk about goals, we get into an argument."

Remedy: Get some communication skills training ASAP. Begin by reading Communication in One Lesson, in the archives of this column. Then pick up the phone and make an appointment for pre-marital counseling. This is a problem you need to nip in the bud.

Don't make envisioning your future the last item on your to-do list. Figure out the reasons why you're not making it a priority; then use these remedies to sit down and start creating a marriage that will make you both happy.

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