

**FOCUS
ON THE
FAMILY[®]**

COMPLETE GUIDE TO



The **FIRST FIVE**



YEARS *of* MARRIAGE

GENERAL EDITORS

PHILLIP J. SWIHART, Ph.D. & WILFORD WOOTEN, L.M.F.T.



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Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage

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Introduction: Why Are the First Five Years So Important?

When it comes to the Indianapolis 500, it may be difficult to predict which lap will be most critical. But in a marriage, the first five years are central. That's when key adjustments are made and expectations are tested.


Take the experience of a young woman who “ran away from home” just two months after her wedding. She told *Focus on the Family* her story 10 years later.

“I've never thanked you for the way your ministry touched me 10 years ago. My husband and I had only been married two months when I panicked and felt that I just couldn't handle the change . . . so I packed my bags, called my pastor's wife to tell her I was leaving, and took off to ‘escape my marriage.’


“As I was driving away from home in desperation and frustration, I turned on the radio. The *Focus on the Family* program was airing and you were interviewing a lady with a powerful testimony of how her own marriage had fallen apart . . . [and] how God had put it back together. At that precise moment, five miles out of town, I pulled over and broke down sobbing. The Lord dealt with me there in the car, and I turned around and went back home to my husband. Your ministry saved me from making a huge mistake. Thank you.”

How you deal with the large and small crises of your marriage during the first five years sets important patterns for the future. That's true whether you're a woman or a man, and whether you tend to run in panic or stay and bury your feelings. Researchers have found consistently that those first years uniquely predict which marriages are likely to flourish and which may die an early death.

Dr. Ted Huston, commenting on a 2001 study, stated that “couples' newlywed marriages and changes in their union foreshadow” the viability of their marriage—which will become evident after a few more years. “Disillusionment—as reflected in an abatement of love, a decline in overt affection, a lessening of



Researchers have found consistently that those first years uniquely predict which marriages are likely to flourish and which may die an early death.



the conviction that one's spouse is responsive, and an increase in ambivalence—distinguishes couples headed for divorce from those who establish a stable, marital bond.”¹

In other words, those first five years can be a time of rapid personal and relational growth—or a period of disappointment and deterioration.

BLISSSED OUT OR STRESSED OUT?

Most marriages start with the delight of “being in love” and honeymoon excitement. The question is what happens next. Does bliss lead to adjustment, compromises, and learning to really love another person who may have very different needs and expectations? Or does it give way to poorly handled conflict, power struggles, and deepening frustration and resentment?

One young woman put it this way about the first year of her marriage: “I thought the first year would be wonderful. It was hell.” She was just beginning to have a glimmer of hope that she and her husband would crawl out of that hole.

For many couples, those first years are a period of high expectations and severe disappointments. For the most mature, those years may be pleasant, even blissful. But none escape without challenges. Plastered-over differences begin to crack through. Contrasts that seemed so intriguing and attractive during a dating relationship can turn irritating and annoying when you live with them 24/7.

During those first few years, people “get naked” in more ways than one. And physical nakedness can be much less revealing than many other kinds.

Even in marriages that end up thriving, marital stressors may be—or at least seem to be—more intense during the first five years than later. Financial problems, for instance, challenge so many young couples in the first few years. So do schedules; a newly-married schoolteacher creating lesson plans for the first time may have a husband who sells insurance 50 to 60 hours a week. If they feel as if they never see each other, it's because they never do.

Trying to agree on priorities is stressful for new spouses, too. What purchases should they make? What should they forgo? Where should they live? Should they buy a house or rent an apartment? Just finding out what the other thinks is normal to spend on clothes or hunting trips can be enlightening—in a very negative way.

Most marriages start with the delight of “being in love” and honeymoon excitement. The question is what happens next.

Other stressors include getting used to the in-laws. Discovering what your mate's family is really like can be a shock.

So is finding that neither of you seems to have any conflict management skills. As one comedian noted, "My wife and I never fight; we just have moments of intense fellowship." Instead of dealing constructively with the inevitable conflicts and disagreements found in any marriage, you may quickly devolve into blaming, yelling, and withdrawing—a toxic cocktail that can send a new marriage spiraling downward.

And then there's sex. Whatever happened to the glorious expectations you had in that wonder-world of dating? It may only take a few months of marital reality for the fantasies of "true love" and sexual excitement to clash with the disappointments of sharing a bed with another imperfect person who's sometimes tough to like, let alone love.

For some, sexual boredom sets in during those first five years. The adventure and mystery are gone. As one wife put it, "As soon as the honeymoon was over, he went back to football games on TV and working on his 'classic' Chevy in the garage. He wasn't interested in talking. He just wanted sex—several times a week. That was it. There was no real intimacy at all. We just became roommates."

When that occurs, the question, "Whatever happened to foreplay?" becomes more insistent. Secret thoughts like, *He thinks he's turning me on by kissing my ears, but I hate having my ears kissed!* begin to multiply. Declarations such as, "What a wonderful lover I married!" disappear.

Another frequent stressor for many recently married couples is pregnancy—and the joys and strains of parenting. Trying to learn a whole new skill set is hard enough, but it's much harder when you're desperate for a few more hours of sleep. Even spouses with more than the usual maturity find themselves unusually irritable and hard to get along with.

The spiritual dimension of your relationship can be a point of contention early in your marriage, too. These years often form fertile ground for spiritual attack by an enemy who would love to destroy a relationship that God has blessed as holy.

For example, a husband may complain, "She sure isn't the woman of Proverbs 31!" A wife may say, "He's not even close to the 'spiritual leader' a husband ought to be!" Spiritual differences that were ignored or minimized during

During those first few years,
people "get naked" in
more ways than one.

the idealism of courtship can become sources of serious conflict after a year or two of marriage.

So can the question of where and how to worship. What kind of church will you attend? If you have a child, will you raise him or her as a Presbyterian, Nazarene, Southern Baptist, Catholic, or something else? What about baptizing him or her? Many couples didn't discuss these questions when they were dating—resulting in early-marriage conflicts that may leave lasting scars in the relationship.

A GUIDE TO WORKING IT OUT

Many of the challenges of the first five years stem from distorted expectations. We live in a fast-food culture with a sense of entitlement to having everything happen on demand. But marriage doesn't work that way.

The apostle Paul advised Christians to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). As radio Bible teacher Alistair Begg has noted, we need to do the same in our marriages. Many spouses are blindsided by the complexities of married life, having assumed they instantly and naturally

know all they need to know about making a relationship work. Begg suggests that we should expect to work out the marriage relationship “with fear and trembling” rather than being cocky and deluded by the notion that it will all come easily.

This is a book about working things out—trembling or otherwise. In the pages to follow you'll find answers to questions commonly asked by recently married couples. You'll probably find some issues you're struggling with. It's our hope and prayer that this book will be a rich source of help and encouragement

on your journey through the partnership called marriage.

You can read this book from beginning to end, but you don't have to. You don't even have to read the answers in order. Take it down from your shelf when you're wrestling with a dilemma.

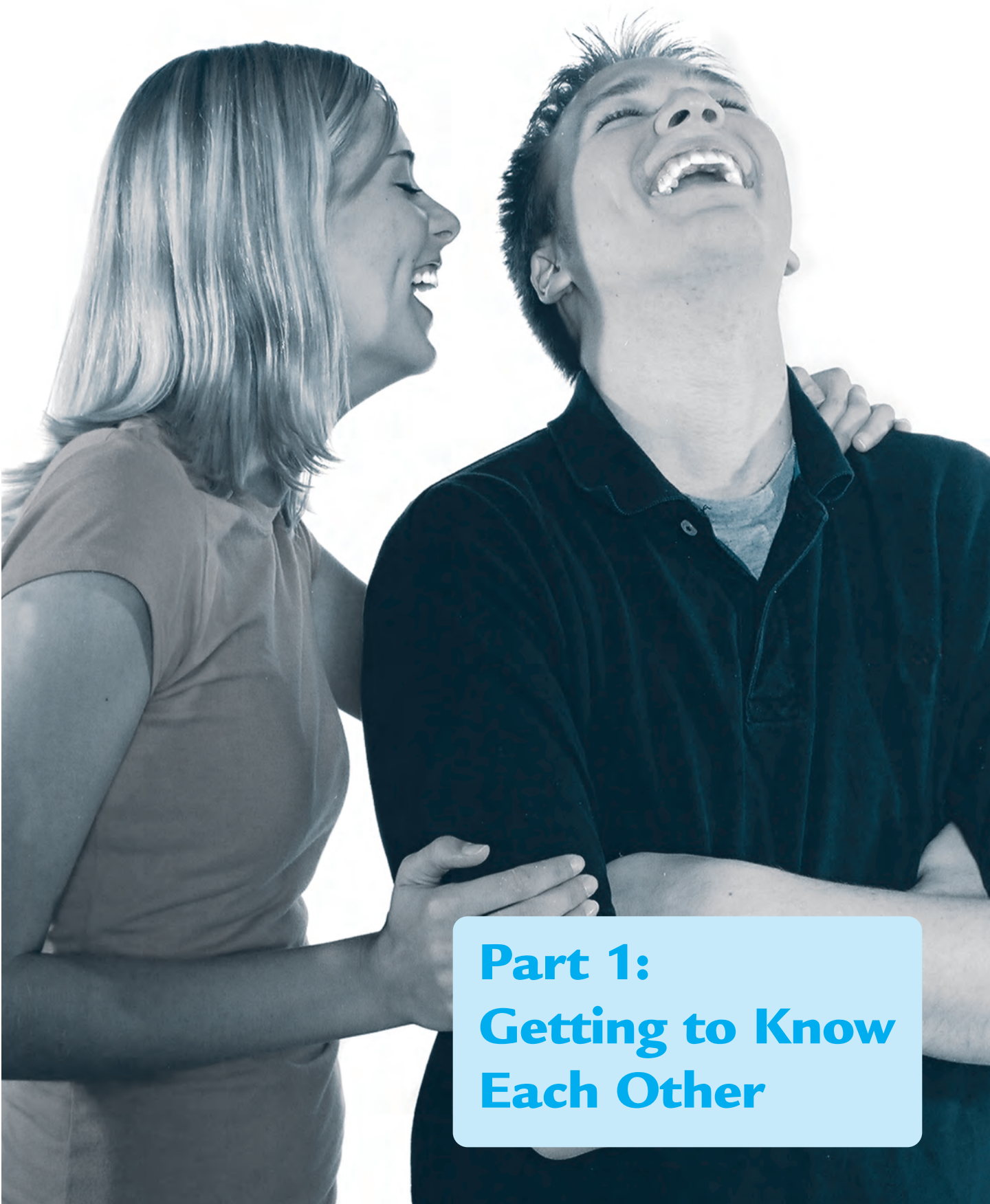
There's another distinctive to this volume, too. The many authors who've contributed have a working relationship with Focus on the Family. Most are pro-

Many of the challenges of the first five years stem from distorted expectations. We live in a fast-food culture with a sense of entitlement to having everything happen on demand. But marriage doesn't work that way.

fessional staff members with Focus on the Family's counseling department. All are committed Christians and highly qualified, licensed mental health, marriage, and family therapists with many years of combined experience in working with thousands of couples and individuals across America.

The early years of marriage are a special adventure. As you explore your new partnership, explore this book, too. We believe you'll find it to be a thought-provoking source of creative solutions for meeting the challenges of your first five years together.

—WILFORD WOOTEN AND PHILLIP J. SWIHART
General Editors



**Part 1:
Getting to Know
Each Other**

How Well Do I Need to Know My Spouse?

When it comes to creating closeness in marriage, honesty is essential. But should you and your spouse know everything about each other?

What if you don't like what your spouse has to say about his or her past? And if there are secrets between you, will that lead to mistrust, doubt—even divorce?


When the two of you are vulnerable and transparent, it helps each of you understand where the other is coming from—which cultivates patience and compassion. But sometimes “letting it all hang out” can hurt a relationship. Where should you draw the line?

To help you know what kinds of information are really necessary, here are nine questions you *do* need to ask your spouse.

1. “*How were you raised?*”

There's no greater influence on your spouse than the way he or she grew up. Ask: “How did you get along with your mother and father? Were your growing-up years pleasant? Hurtful? What did you like about the way you were raised? What didn't you like? How do you think childhood may have shaped your views of the opposite sex, yourself, and intimacy (emotional and physical)? Have you dealt with any pain from the past? If so, how? If not, are you planning to do so?”

One wife discovered how valuable this kind of conversation can be. “Understanding that Brett and his mother didn't get along gave me some insight into our relationship,” she said. “Brett's mother always criticized him and made him feel worthless. If he didn't please her, she would withdraw for days to punish him. Learning how his mom approached him and prefacing my confrontation by telling him I love him and I am not going anywhere but that I just want to resolve our issue, has helped a lot. Before I understood his fear of me abandoning him like his mom did, whenever I confronted him he would internalize everything so as not to upset me for fear I would leave. This never accomplished anything. Now he's willing to speak his mind with me.”


Sometimes “letting it all hang out” can hurt a relationship. Where should you draw the line?



Understanding your spouse in this way helps you not to take it personally when old patterns cause problems. It also helps you work together to overcome them.

2. *“How would you describe your relationship with God?”*

For Christians, marriage is a total commitment of two people to the Lord and to each other. It’s a partnership intended to allow spouses to be themselves fully, to help refine each other, and to encourage each other to become the people God created them to be. For this union to be as successful as the Lord designed it to be, you need to understand how much you and your partner have in common when it comes to faith.

3. *“How do you deal with finances?”*

Tammy complained to her sister, “Larry grew up in a family where his mother took care of all the finances. She paid the bills and decided how the money was to be spent. I’m not good with finances and don’t want that responsibility. I assumed that the man was responsible for the budget in the household.”

Larry and Tammy needed to discuss how money was to be handled in their house. Both had come into marriage with different expectations but hadn’t talked about them.

When they finally sat down and discussed finances, they decided Larry would be in charge of paying the bills because he seemed to have been gifted with financial wisdom. They mapped out a budget and pledged that before any big purchases

were made, they’d agree on them together.

4. *“How do you see the roles of husband and wife?”*

“My mom was a stay-at-home mother,” Quinn said. “She took care of the house and the kids. When Kathy went back to work, we would fight all the time because she didn’t take care of the house like she should.”

Kathy saw things differently: “Our finances were tight, so I wanted to go back to work. But he still expects that I cook, clean, and do all the caretaking of the house. He believes that’s the woman’s job. I think we should share the chores because we’re both working. His view of our roles is much more traditional than how I feel is best for the both of us.”

For this union to be as successful as the Lord designed it to be, you need to understand how much you and your partner have in common when it comes to faith.

It's important to find out how your spouse thinks husband-wife roles should play out in your household, and how those roles might change during the seasons of your marriage. In the case of Quinn and Kathy, they decided that while she worked they would share chores—but when she was able to stay home, Quinn would be the breadwinner and Kathy would be in charge of household upkeep.

5. *“What roles should in-laws have?”*

What part does your spouse see both sets of parents playing in your life together?

“Susan always seeks her dad’s advice before she seeks mine,” Caleb says. “I love her dad, but feel it’s my role as her husband to have her talk things over with me first.” Having been pretty independent from an early age, Caleb feels betrayed and not trusted by Susan when she involves her parents in every decision.

Melina, on the other hand, grew up without a mom. She’s come to love her husband, Spencer’s, mother as if she were her own, and consults her mother-in-law on many decisions. Because Spencer is so close to his folks and trusts them implicitly, he enjoys the fact that Melina is willing to seek their counsel.

The way you deal with in-laws will depend on the depth and type of relationship you have with them. Make sure you understand your spouse’s view of that relationship and what that means practically.

6. *“What do you expect regarding our sexual relationship?”*

Does your spouse believe sex is for procreation, relaxation, pleasure and fun, expressing intimacy, or all of the above?



Ask: “What kinds of things stimulate you? Who do you want to be the initiator? How would you like me to suggest having sex? How should I tell you I’m not in the mood? How often do you think we should have sex?”

One wife, Mary Lee, said, “I always heard that the man was to be the initiator in sex. But when I asked Jim what he thought about that, he told me it would please him if I took initiative at times. It would make him feel like I desired him rather than just feeling like I was only accommodating his desires.” The two of them discovered how freeing it was to talk about these things instead of having unspoken—and unmet—expectations.



Helping your partner pursue his or her passions is vital to your marriage’s health. You won’t know those dreams if you don’t ask.




Inquire about your spouse's goal for your marriage, too. Is it closeness? Wealth? To have a family? Career success? To be used as a team in some ministry?


7. *“What are your goals—for yourself and for us?”*

Ask your spouse what his or her dreams are. “Kevin is an incredible businessman,” one wife said. “He’s always been very diligent to work hard and provide well for our family. I thought he was happy until I asked him what he would do if he could do anything in the world. He said he would be in the ministry. He’s now going to seminary. I’m so happy I asked him his dream; otherwise he may have stayed stuck in a job that supported us but wasn’t fulfilling to him.”

Helping your partner pursue his or her passions is vital to your marriage’s health. You won’t know those dreams if you don’t ask.

Inquire about your spouse’s goal for your marriage, too. Is it closeness? Wealth? To have a family? Career success? To be used as a team in some ministry? Discuss these dreams and set realistic goals with time limits. For example: “In five years we want to be out of debt.” “In one year we want to save enough money to go on a family mission trip.”

8. *“How did you communicate and resolve conflict in your family?”*

In tears, Elizabeth told her mother, “Bobby yells at me when we talk to each other.” Elizabeth didn’t understand how her husband could think that was okay. She was an only child who’d rarely had conflicts with her family.

Bobby, on the other hand, was the youngest of five brothers. His was a fun-loving family that spoke loudly and often. He thought he was just talking passionately to Elizabeth; she heard it as yelling.

When the two of them finally discussed their families’ communication styles, they began to understand the differences. Elizabeth no longer felt “run over,” while Bobby saw that his wife’s low-intensity way of talking didn’t mean that she was indifferent.

9. *“Are there medical issues in your family?”*

Do heart disease, diabetes, or other medical problems run in your mate’s family? Is your spouse dealing with a chronic condition? How is it treated? Have there been unusual deaths in the family?

It’s important to know your spouse’s medical history so that you can work together to prevent further problems, collaborate on diet and exercise, and consider possible implications for your children.

As you ask these nine questions, keep your spouse's temperament in mind. If he or she seems hesitant to talk, don't nag. Just explain why you're looking for information and how it can bring you closer.

Remember the importance of timing, too. For example, if your mate ignored your interest in sexual intimacy last night, try waiting until neither of you is upset to discuss sexual expectations. Likewise, a spouse who's tired, stressed, or sick won't be able to focus on the issues. As for a mate who's asked about family history, he or she may need time to gather information—or just think.

Be considerate of your spouse's feelings. But don't neglect to ask these questions. The only way to understand your mate is to know him or her.

—SHERYL DEWITT

How Honest Do We Have to Be?

1. Healthy relationships are built on trust.
2. If you aren't totally honest, trust is impossible.
3. Without trust, the relationship crumbles.

This sounds simple—too simple, as it turns out.

If you're a Christian, are you required to be “absolutely” honest with your spouse? After all, the Scriptures are clear that lying is a serious affront to God. Christians are to strive for honesty—and truth is absolute, not relative.

But what does that mean when your wife asks, “Does this dress make me look fat?” What does it mean when your husband was intimate with a girlfriend before he met you?

In other words, does perfect honesty exist in imperfect human relationships? And if you aren't completely candid with your spouse, will your marriage fall apart?

Are you required to be “absolutely” honest with your spouse? What does that mean when your wife asks, “Does this dress make me look fat?”

To answer those questions, we need to ask another: What does “honest” mean?

To be honest certainly is to tell the truth. But by “honest” do you mean simply that whatever you communicate is accurate? Or do you also mean that you're obligated to communicate all information you have on any and all topics, both from your present and past?

Being honest in the sense of telling the truth is not the same as imparting every thought and feeling you have. Joe and Suzie learned that the hard way.

They'd been married two years. Suzie often remembered that Joe had been “honest” in telling her during a premarital counseling session that he'd had sexual experiences with two other women before becoming a Christian five years ago. He'd also told her that no children had been the result of these liaisons, and that he'd never contracted any sexually transmitted diseases.

Suzie came into the marriage a virgin, but didn't think Joe's sexual history would be a problem for her. As time went by, however, she found herself think-

ing more and more about these “other women” and Joe’s experiences with them. She decided to be “honest” and tell her husband that she was increasingly anxious about his past dalliances. If he would just answer a couple of questions, she said, she’d be able to forget the whole thing.

Wanting to put her concern to rest, Joe reluctantly agreed to talk briefly about these old girlfriends. Suzie wanted to know their names, how they looked, why Joe was attracted to them, how long he dated them, and whether he was in love with them at the time.

He was “honest” in describing one of them as a cute, sexy blonde and the other as an attractive, more intellectual redhead. He recalled being fascinated with the redhead, and “falling in love” or at least “in lust” with the blonde. Neither relationship lasted long after a brief sexual affair.

Much to Joe’s disappointment, these “honest” answers did nothing to satisfy Suzie’s increasing obsession with his history. She seemed even more anxious and began to demand detailed, intimate information about the two sexual relationships. Joe began to withdraw from Suzie’s “interrogations” as he called them, and refused to talk with her about anything in his past.

Suzie, meanwhile, began to accuse Joe of hiding things from her. She said she could no longer trust him.


For Joe and Suzie, this effort to be “honest” turned into a painful, ugly series of interchanges that became toxic for their relationship, the dynamics of which remained unclear to both of them.

So is honesty the best policy?


Couples should be honest before making a lifelong commitment to marriage, disclosing information that could influence that decision. This includes medical and financial status, past marriages and children if any, spiritual journey and current walk in the faith, criminal history, and other “risk” factors.

In considering how honest to be in a marriage, though, it’s important to examine the intent of the heart.

“Honesty” sounds pious, but can be a selfish excuse for meeting your own needs. In Suzie’s case, one of her motives for demanding that Joe be “totally honest” was trying to relieve some insecurities. She was thinking, *How do I compare with my husband’s past lovers? If I don’t measure up, he’ll be tempted again by*



Being honest in the sense of telling the truth is not the same as imparting every thought and feeling you have.



another woman. Her demand for even more intimate, detailed information became increasingly intense, resulting in a destructive process that had little to do with true honesty.

In the name of honesty, some people give their spouses too much information about past and present sinful actions and thoughts. To feel better about themselves, they dump their guilt feelings on their mates—unnecessarily hurting them.

Others have more sinister motives. Often the “honest” information being offered is carefully selected and intended to create anxiety in the spouse. For example, an insecure husband may try to create jealousy in his wife by describing how his female coworkers flirt with him.

Silence—choosing not to disclose all events of the day or all thoughts that cross your mind— isn’t necessarily dishonest. In fact, sometimes the loving thing to do is to keep your mouth shut.

Giving a diplomatic answer in love rather than a cold, blunt “truth” is not the same as lying. In many instances, it’s not particularly virtuous to “honestly” tell your husband that he’s boring or not much of a lover.

And if your wife *does* ask, “Does this dress make me look fat?” the biblical admonition about “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) comes to mind. The flat truth is that the dress doesn’t *make* her look fat. A more diplomatic and loving response than a simple “yes” is much advised. For example, you could tell

her that although you think her blue dress looks better on her, she’s very attractive no matter what dress she’s wearing. “No, that dress doesn’t make you look fat,” you might say. “You look beautiful.”

Being truthful in marriage is vital. But before demanding or disclosing “all,” first be honest with yourself about your motives. Is this for the benefit of your partner and the relationship? Or is it really an attempt to imma-

turally or selfishly meet some of your own needs? Can those needs be met in a more emotionally healthy and spiritually mature way?

If you can’t answer those questions, you may need help seeing the issues more clearly. In that case, consider seeking the insight of a wise spiritual leader or professional Christian counselor.

—PHILLIP J. SWIHART

For Joe and Suzie, an effort to be “honest” turned into a painful, ugly series of interchanges that became toxic for their relationship.

How Can I Get Used to Being Two Instead of One?

The sudden change that comes after the honeymoon can be one of life's most sobering moments. Some young couples describe this as "being hit in the face with cold water" or "being struck by lightning."

Others express it this way:

"I feel like I'm on another planet, and I want to go home!"

"I miss being able to do what I want to do, when I want to do it."

And here's a favorite that marriage therapists hear often: "If two becoming one means that I disappear as a person, forget it!"

If you feel like this, don't think you're alone or that your situation is hopeless. The following quotations illustrate the fact that the adjustment period from aloneness to togetherness is often complex:

I figure that the degree of difficulty in combining two lives ranks somewhere between rerouting a hurricane and finding a parking place in downtown Manhattan.

—Claire Cloninger

I love being married. It's so great to find that one special person you want to annoy for the rest of your life.

—Rita Rudner

Many couples wonder how the blending of two personalities and sets of ambitions, desires, and dreams could ever be expected by a wise and all-knowing God! Trying to adjust from "freedom" to partnership can be difficult and exasperating—but it's a process, not just a destination.

Here are two principles to remember when moving from independence to interdependence in marriage.

1. *The feelings are normal.* When we shift from being single to being married,



"I miss being able to do what I want to do, when I want to do it."



we experience loss. Losing something leaves us feeling sad. But as we grow in our relationship with the person we committed to, the grief can turn to joy and contentment.

It's common for young couples to experience various levels of "buyer's remorse." That was the case with Nicole and Ted.

Nicole had waited for many years to find the right man to spend the rest of her life with. At age 33, she met Ted. Within 13 months they were married in her hometown of Atlanta.

Though she was certain Ted was the man God had chosen for her, Nicole missed her independence. Often she felt sad, conflicted, confused—wondering whether she'd made the wrong decision about marriage. She loved Ted and was thankful for him, realizing she couldn't have asked for a better man. But she struggled with having to give up her "alone time" and sense of freedom.

After praying, studying the Bible, and getting direction from Christian friends, Nicole began to see that her feelings were normal and that most people experience them. She accepted the responsibility of honoring the relationship God had given her with Ted. Each day she made conscious efforts to enjoy her relationship with her new husband in the fullest sense.

Though she occasionally needed time alone, Nicole learned to think in terms of two instead of one. When tempted to do her own thing at Ted's expense, she resisted. When it would have been easy to plop down on the couch after a hard day's work, she spent time with her husband first. Ted responded in a similar way, and their marriage developed into a bond filled with joy and intimacy.

That's how closeness and biblical oneness develop in marriages in spite of selfish tendencies. Though challenging and often confusing, the transition from independence to interdependence is absolutely vital to your union.

2. *It takes work to grow in oneness.* On a torn envelope, Sarah finds the following note left on the kitchen table one morning: "Sarah, I know you said you would like to spend time with me. I agree that we've really grown apart lately. I think we need to spend more time together, and I know you were looking forward to relaxing for a couple of evenings. Well, you get your wish. The boss called and said I have to work tonight.

When we shift from being single to being married, we experience loss. Losing something leaves us feeling sad.

“By the way, would you mind ironing my golf shorts when you get home? I have a tournament tomorrow. Oh, before I forget, tomorrow night the guys are coming over to watch the game. You don’t mind, do you? And something else—I’m leaving on business to San Diego Monday. I’ll be gone the rest of the week.”

If Sarah is like most wives, she’s thinking, *How in the world does this goof-ball think we’re going to get close if he’s always gone or having someone over?*

She’s right; healthy relationships don’t just evolve, they’re nurtured.

Suppose Jesus had taken the attitude that closeness would “just happen” with His disciples. “Okay,” He might say. “I have called you guys to be apostles. You have left everything to follow Me. But I have a lot of stress on Me; I have to save the world! So My ‘alone time’ is very important. Your job is to take the gospel to the whole world, but I really think you can handle this without Me. I’ll spend Saturdays with you, but the rest of the time you’re on your own.”

Is that how Jesus became “one” with His disciples? No. He understood the value of spending time with them, talking, teaching, dining, and experiencing happy and challenging moments together. There were times when Jesus needed to be alone, but He understood the value of being with His followers, too. In the end, He gave His life for them and they gave theirs for Him—the ultimate testimony of oneness.

If you find yourself struggling with the challenges of togetherness, here are some simple suggestions.

1. *Remember who brought you together.* God has united the two of you for a reason. It’s no accident. He calls you to become one (Genesis 2:24), to honor one another (Ephesians 5:22-33), to love one another (1 Corinthians 13), and to remain together until death separates you (Matthew 19:9).

2. *Change the way you think.* You’re still an individual. But God has called you to leave your father and mother and unite with your spouse. That means making changes in your thinking (you belong to someone else now) as well as your behavior (you don’t act like a single person anymore). Changing the way you think can change the way you feel. Start thinking like a married person, and you’ll probably begin to feel like one.



Suppose Jesus had taken the attitude that closeness would “just happen” with His disciples. “Okay,” He might say. “My ‘alone time’ is very important. I’ll spend Saturdays with you, but the rest of the time you’re on your own.”



3. *Educate yourself about God's desire for unity in your marriage.* Read Bible passages that emphasize the importance of oneness and unity (John 17; 1 Corinthians 7). Personalize them by inserting your name and the name of your spouse. Pray that God will show you any attitudes and actions that stand in the way of oneness. Stop focusing on your mate's mistakes, and start working on unity by changing yourself.

4. *Learn from others.* Ask couples you know who have strong marriages how they moved from independence to interdependence. What mind-sets and habits did they adopt that worked for them?

If you asked that of Bill and Ruth, here's what they might tell you.

Bill was independent. So was Ruth. For the first three years of their marriage things were so rocky that both felt they'd made a mistake in getting married. They developed separate interests and friendships, spent little time with each other, grew apart, and even considered divorce. But because of their church background, they felt they had to stay together.



Things changed on their third anniversary. They made a commitment to each other: No matter what, they would learn how to connect and develop intimacy. They began studying the Bible and praying together, and attended every marriage conference they could find. They made spending time together a hobby; where you saw one, you'd see the other. They took up golf and skiing.

For the next 20 years they would have at least one date a week.

Recently Bill and Ruth went to another marriage retreat—where they were voted Most Dedicated Couple. Their switch from aloneness to togetherness hadn't just happened. They'd intentionally drawn closer and stuck with that commitment.

They'd probably tell you that intentional intimacy is an investment that always pays off—and they'd be right.

—MITCH TEMPLE


Start thinking like a married person, and you'll probably begin to feel like one.


Recommended Resources

There are many helpful books and other resources to guide you through the first five years of marriage. Check your local bookstore for the following:

- Becoming One: Emotionally, Spiritually, Sexually* by Joe Beam (Howard Publishing, 2003)
- Boundaries in Marriage* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 2002)
- The DNA of Relationships* by Gary Smalley (Tyndale House Publishers, 2004)
- For Women Only* by Shaunti Feldhahn (Multnomah, 2004)
- The Gift of Sex: A Guide to Sexual Fulfillment* by Clifford L. Penner and Joyce J. Penner (W Publishing Group, 2003)
- Great Expectations: An Interactive Guide to Your First Year of Marriage* by Toben and Joanne Heim (NavPress, 2000)
- Healing the Hurt in Your Marriage* by Dr. Gary and Barbara Rosberg (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2004)
- Hedges: Loving Your Marriage Enough to Protect It* by Jerry B. Jenkins (Crossway Books, 2005)
- Hidden Keys of a Loving, Lasting Marriage* by Gary Smalley and Norma Smalley (Zondervan, 1993)
- His Needs, Her Needs: Building an Affair-Proof Marriage* by Willard F. Harley, Jr. (Monarch Books, 1994)
- How Do You Say, "I Love You"?* by Judson Swihart (InterVarsity Press, 1977)
- The Language of Love* by Gary Smalley and John Trent, Ph.D. (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishing, 2006)
- Love and Respect* by Dr. Emerson Eggerichs (Integrity Publishers, 2004)
- Love for a Lifetime* by Dr. James Dobson (Multnomah, 2004)

Love Must Be Tough: New Hope for Families in Crisis by Dr. James Dobson
(Multnomah, 2004)

The Marriage Masterpiece by Al Janssen (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House
Publishing, 2001)

*The Most Important Year in a Woman's Life/The Most Important Year in a Man's
Life* by Robert Wolgemuth, Bobbie Wolgemuth, Mark DeVries, and
Susan DeVries (Zondervan, 2003)

Sacred Marriage by Gary Thomas (Zondervan, 2002)

Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts by Les and Leslie Parrott (Zondervan,
1995)

Surviving a Spiritual Mismatch in Marriage by Lee and Leslie Strobel (Zonder-
van, 2002)

*The following booklets and recordings are available
from Focus on the Family (call 1-800-A-FAMILY):*

Accepting Your Mate's Differences by Dr. Kevin Leman (Focus on the Family
broadcast CD192)

Building a Marriage That Lasts by Dr. James Dobson (Focus on the Family
booklet LF154)

Learning to Communicate by Gary Smalley and John Trent (Focus on the
Family broadcast CD111)

Nothing to Hide by Joann Condie (Focus on the Family booklet F00038T)

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