

What Couples Argue About

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If you are fairly psychologically aware, have listened to a few Dr. Phil's or read a Mars and Venus book, you have already heard that the marital BIG THREE problems are sex, money and children. I would probably add sharing household chores to this list and extended family as common sources of tension. As a marriage counselor there is a lot more I could add to this, but I want you to know that these problems are just the content of the ways your marriage is vulnerable in terms of closeness, intimacy, equality, honesty, trust and shared goals. The underlying issues are always about who gets to decide, who's needs are privileged, how do we acknowledge and meet needs for both dependency and independence, and how do we feel valued . And that is very frequently often related to how we felt valued, attached, and safe in childhood.

People hate to hear this. Nobody wants to find a better marriage by rehashing their childhood. It is almost cliché. I understand this. So, as a very good marriage counselor, I have found pretty effective ways of "sneaking it in". "No child gets all that they need. What did you really need in childhood that you didn't get?" In a moment of safety and honesty in therapy, most of us can name "that thing"....to feel safe, to feel like I matter, to feel trusted, to feel competent, to feel loved, to be approved of, to feel visible, to feel accepted when I don't do well, to be free to be a child. Once named, it is not too hard to see how we continue to look for resolution of that need in adulthood.

The second part of this is how we coped as a child when our needs were thwarted. Did we become very obedient, did we withdraw, did we act-out or become aggressive, did we deny our needs, did we become overly pleasing? Whatever worked when we were young was our very best attempt to deal with life as a child. Unfortunately as adults, we need to challenge these strategies and learn to deal with others as respectful and assertive adults. No easy task! Marriage is the process of learning to do this. Marriage brings out our most vulnerable selves.

While I plan on addressing some of the common pitfalls in marriage and things people most argue about, please do understand that the content almost never is the problem.

SEX IN MARRIAGE

There are normal developmental stages of sexual satisfaction in marriage. No surprise, sex is often wonderful in the early stages of a relationship to be followed by the routines of marriage and the conflicting roles and agendas of becoming a parent. Most couples will say that their sexual relationship was great/good/or OK until children came along. Men and women almost always come with different levels of desire. Men are very efficient in their response to arousal, women are incredibly complex, with

arousal patterns easily changed by fatigue, negative feelings, arguments, and even just interruptions to excitement. For most women, if the phone rings, it's over. If their husband has not been attentive, it's over. If the children are sick or even in the house, it's over. If the dog barks, it's over. I would agree with great sympathy for the male species, this is a very inefficient system. But, it is the reality of a woman's arousal. A satisfied husband will understand this, provide an environment as best he can that is free of distractions, continually send messages of love and invitation (NOT SEX), and be a good sport if these things don't coexist on any given night. These are the kinds of statements that will help you (the male) connect with your spouse; "Your hair looks so pretty tonight:", " I love the way you keep our home inviting", "I'm proud that are so good at your job", "You are a wonderful mother". "I know it is hard right now", "Thank you for trying", "Thank you for understanding me", "Thank you for your patience", "Thank you for your forgiveness". These are the fans of a woman's desire.

Women in turn, have many things they need to do to improve their marriage sexually. Simply put, you can't turn off this part of life and expect your husband to just accept this. A young man will look elsewhere. An older man, will pull away and find closeness in other pursuits that may not be sexual but will still become the place he finds intimacy. Your husband always needs to know you value his physical presence, you accept his good intent for your well-being, and try your hardest to help him in a non-critical way grow into a mature, loving man. Notice everything he does that approximates responsibility and positive mature love. Appreciate him more and criticize him less. His brain has a three- fold larger area that involves sexual interest. He wants you because he loves you and this is his most natural way of showing and receiving love. Men attach through sex. This is the only time men release the same hormone that women release during breast feeding; oxytocin, a profound bonding hormone.

Wives think their husbands should "just know" how to please them. This just isn't so. Partners need to tell each other what feels good, and what doesn't. Women need to let their spouses know that their bodies are complicated, they may not achieve orgasm, and this is often alright. Don't fall into a pattern of "faking" orgasm or "taking one for the team". Men really want to please and satisfy their wife. Let them learn to do so. Help them.

Women have a daunting challenge during sex. They have to stop their brains from working! They have to forget the laundry, the kids, the neighbors. Men do this on a dime. For women this takes herculean effort. And beyond this problem of focus, women have to give up all self-judgments of body image, and embrace "animal" instincts. Here is the real deal. Women have a very hard time acknowledging what many consider the "baser" instincts. In my own life, I find that women open this door with more confidence after they have had a child. Women first really meet face to face with primal instinct during childbirth not to mention a definite change in rules around modesty. To achieve orgasm, a women needs to succumb to the body. This is often difficult as women are often taught from puberty to not succumb to the body, to "be a lady".

Money in Marriage

How couples handle money is often reflective of how couples view their marriage. In my parent's generation many women didn't work and staying home and raising children was the ideal. Spouses would work at one job most of their life and look forward to company retirement. In this model, there was one check book, no debit cards, and little consumer debt. The husband would pay the bills and give his wife a cash allowance to use for groceries and minor household expenses.

Clearly that is ancient history. Today, there is more than likely a his, hers, and joint account; as well as savings and brokerage accounts. Bills are most often paid by the person who accrued the service or

debt, and the payment method is more often electronic. Joint expenses are handled in a variety of ways. Perhaps each spouse puts 50% of joint expenses into the “pot”, or perhaps they contribute proportionate to their income, or perhaps even proportionate to their personal expenses. The way couples define what is fair and to what measure they allow blending of funds is often indicative of how connected and safe they feel as a couple.

As a marriage counselor I almost always recommend first –time married couples have a joint account and a joint savings and that’s it! Marriage involves sharing, working out differences, and a strong sense of a committed future. I recommend couples pay bills together on a schedule and review each time how they are doing within the family budget.

Disaster follows when couples don’t have accountability with each other. The agreements and disagreements about spending are fertile ground to work out communication capabilities and to develop mutual goals. When couples start living separate lives financially, they are not far from separate lives altogether.

Children in Marriage

The final BIG THREE issue in marriage is children. It is a normal developmental stage in marriage that young children bring a drop in marital satisfaction. Both spouses have to adjust to finding satisfaction in being a parent, often second in line for their spouse’s attention. Most new mother’s become preoccupied with their new babies. Couple time alone decreases as does the incidence of sexual activity. Women have difficulty merging the roles of sexuality and motherhood.

Many men feel rejected by their wives during this time period. It is not unusual for women to also experience a postpartum depression that increases isolation and decreased confidence. It is important that a husband stay connected to his wife, attend doctor appointments, and speak frankly to health professionals about concerns. In my opinion, it is very important to treat post-partum depressions as this can lead to many longer term problems in the marriage.

Partners may feel like they are “on the same page” during their courtship and early marriage. But once children are born, mixed loyalties emerge. Parents of both the wife and husband may also begin to become more opinionated and intrusive. The load of actual labor often becomes unbalanced with the woman becoming exhausted and tied to the home while her husband continues to lead his life. During the first three months of life, a new mother needs to feel like she can sleep, go shopping, see girlfriends. This requires an understanding husband and help from parents and friends.

So, here are a few comments on the BIG THREE. Don’t hesitate to see a Marriage and family Therapist for further help.

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