



For better or for worse



As you get closer to the big day, keep in mind that it's not just about the perfect wedding but a loving and committed marriage too. Marriage counsellors tell us what it takes to last the long haul

BY SUKAYNA KAZMI

People may dream about their fairytale wedding but married life is a whole other ballgame. No marriage is perfect and, as the couple grows together, issues will always arise. Here's what the pros have to say about making a marriage work.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Many couples don't realise that a lot of problems that arise in a relationship could easily be resolved or would not have erupted in the first place had the couple communicated with each other well, says licensed psychologist and professor, Sarah Rasmi, founder of Thrive Wellbeing Centre.

"When it comes to communicating, the way we present our message has a huge impact on how it's going to be received, so we need to make sure that, when we speak to our partner, we frame our requests around what we need and what we're feeling, rather than what the person is doing wrong," she says. "That way, our partner is actually more likely to listen to us and be motivated to take action."

The second part of communicating is listening, where it's crucial for one to understand what the other person is trying to say rather than forming a defensive response.

"A lot of times, people think about how they're going to argue against what their partner is saying and they don't actually hear them. And that's not very healthy," she says. "It's important to actively listen so we can understand our partner's perspective."

According to Sarah, when we're faced with a tense situation, heart rates accelerate and we tend to go into a 'fight or flight mode'. When we reach this state, it becomes challenging to communicate, in both speaking and listening. "At that moment, it's okay to say: I need some time to calm down before having this conversation. But it is important that we don't push it off indefinitely. Research suggests we postpone the conversation by 20 minutes but not longer than 24 hours. This gives us time to cool off but also allows us to re-address the issue," she advises.

Alongside communication, it's important to have a solid friendship, which creates a base for strong marriage. To strengthen that bond, couples should ask each other questions and listen to responses on an on-going basis.

"We spend a lot of the early period of our relationship getting to know one another and, over time, the assumption

is that we've been together for years so we know each other inside-out. However, people change and evolve overtime, so make it a deliberate point to check in," says the Canadian doctor.

The 'honeymoon phase' doesn't last forever and so young couples should always think about what they really want and don't want in a partner. Making a list and dividing it into things that are negotiable and non-negotiable before they get married will help them understand each other better, says Sarah. "According to scientific research, on average, it helps to have a partner who has similar values," she says.

So, the idea of 'opposites attracting' may not always be the case.

BECOMING ONE UNIT.

A common mistake couples make is trying to replicate family history. According to clinical psychologist Hussain Ali Maseeh, couples should be open to the idea of working with each other to create their own unique family unit.

"Rather than working on the goals of their respective families, they have to be united and work on their relationship together. If the relationship is one-sided, meaning one person is putting in the effort and compromising while the other one is not, then it will create a tilted relationship that may be stable for a while but will create a lot of tension," says the Emirati who is currently medical director of the Dubai Community Health Center.

When it comes to long-term relationships, conflict is inevitable. It is unrealistic for someone to get married and expect no disagreements to arise. "You start as separate entities and then build this relationship bit by bit, one issue at a time, until you feel like one person. We notice that couples in successful and happy relationships, even begin to think alike after some time, finish each other's sentences," he says, further emphasising the importance of one happy unit.

That isn't to say that just because a couple is together means they are having a successful marriage. "There are situations where husband and wife live together but are miserable. What couples need to seek is a happy relationship that is satisfactory to both parties," says Hussain.

He suggests that whenever a negative experience occurs (a heated fight for example), one should counter it with at least five good situations, to get rid of any bad feelings. Exchanging

presents, going out together and giving compliments go a long way! His final advice for couples — old or young — is to accept that there will be issues but to focus on resolving them together.

LOOK AT THINGS FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

For a lot of couples in the 'honeymoon phase' it's hard to believe that the relationship will come with disagreements. "We've bought into the Hollywood version of marriage as something that happens magically, romantically and without work. Nothing could be further from the truth. The reality is that few things worth having come without effort," says Kennon Rider, a marriage and family therapist from The Psychiatry and Therapy Centre, Health Care City, who hails from Texas, US. "We should think of marriage, in a way, like a college education or good career. Both require effort and create large payoffs. In the case of marriage, it requires, at minimum, our close attention, and optimally, a view that is a lifelong project of continuing education, learning, discovery, adjustment and adventure."

So, when conflict was to arise, he suggests giving one's partner the benefit of the doubt, and taking time out to understand and empathise. "Instead of jumping to conclusion, ask yourself, 'could I have misunderstood?' Is it possible that his/ her perspective might be different?"

However, when problems are deep-rooted and the same arguments keep cropping up, it might be time to share it with someone who can help. Many couples who have been married for years have long-term issues that should have, ideally, been solved earlier, before they had children. "Think of long-term issues as habits," he explains. "Habits that are relatively new are easier to disrupt than habits that have lasted years."

In some cases, guidance from a counsellor can work wonders. "We often see couples circling around the same issue, doing exactly the same thing and expecting different results," says Kennon. "Sometimes, it leads to anger as each person justifies their behaviour and blames the other. This is a pattern that keeps them locked in conflict. A counsellor's job is to disrupt this pattern, and rebuild a new one that is healthy, productive and mutually encouraging. At the end of the day, it's about flourishing every step of the way — that is what makes a marriage work!" W



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