

Lessons for a Strong Marriage

Flowers are blooming, the invitations are arriving, and couples everywhere are wondering why they didn't just elope! Planning a wedding can be very stressful but it is also a great time to work on the skills that not only help you get married but *stay* married. Turns out that planning a wedding and building a life require many of the same skills. I like to call it the four C's of couplehood; take a look and see how ready you are to take the plunge.



Courage. Ask any guy who has ever dropped to one knee or any girl who's held her breath before opening a small velvet box, deciding to spend your entire life with another person takes some an inordinate amount of courage. What if you fight? What if your families fight? And what about all the other good-looking, fun to be with, fun-loving singles out there? There are so many potential pitfalls and problems lurking around the corner that the simple act of getting engaged can really be seen as a heroic act. It is a moment of pure vulnerability, one person lays their heart on the line and asks for the ultimate declaration of love and the other (we hope) puts their heart on the line by trusting their new fiancé to take care of it forever. While the proposal and wedding may be the most public moment of vulnerability you share with your spouse-to-be it is only the beginning of a lifetime of small yet equally important moments in which the only way to move forward is to be brave enough to step forward together.

Communication. Whether it's deciding on a live band or DJ for the reception or negotiating the treacherous waters of the seating chart, your wedding is often the first real test of your communication skills. Communication is the foundation for every decision, every moment of connection, and every moment of angst before the wedding and for decades to come. Hopefully you already know a little something about how to talk with each other and how to read your partner's nonverbal body language before any rings are exchanged. But don't stop there, consider premarital counseling workshops and retreats (like the one's Group Therapy Associates offers), read books, ask other couples, and above all else keep talking with each other about your relationship. The more you learn to speak each other's language and resist the temptation to lash out in the heat of argument the better you are able to build a strong marital foundation.

Cuddling. I was inclined to call this one closeness because that's really what we're talking about but cuddling sounds so much more fun and every couple needs a little fun. Rarely do couples have a shortage of cuddle time during the honeymoon but as the honeymoon period wears off, couples need to find ways to be close and connected without words. Often over course of a relationship, couples begin to equate touching each other with sex. While a good foot rub might help you get lucky tonight, touch is necessary everyday outside of the context of sex. Learn to use touch as a way to initiate intimacy, not just sex. Don't be afraid to ask for a hug or grab your partners hand on the walk from the car to the grocery store. When words fail, a loving touch can communicate what you are truly feeling and keep you reminiscing on that first kiss as husband and wife .

Commitment. This is the magic glue of all long-term relationships. When the cuddling isn't enough and the communication has fallen apart and you're too tired or scared to be courageous and take that leap of faith... commitment will hold you over until the other pieces fall back into place. The promise to have and to hold till death do you part is more than a traditional rite of passage, more than a moment of sentimentality; it is a personal conviction to stand up against the storms that will inevitably come your way and not give up. I have a dear friend who also happens to be a marriage and family therapist and sometimes when we talk about marriage she will say "Some days you're only married because you haven't left." It's not a romantic notion to consider at the outset of marriage but an important lesson for the years to come. Some days your husband will be annoying and inconsiderate. Some days your wife will be nagging and condescending. Some days you won't know why but you just don't "feel it" anymore with each other. Commitment is the first plank in the bridge that gets you from those days back to the happier days of loving conversation and snuggling under the covers together.

Esther Boykin is a licensed marriage and family therapist and the co-owner of Group Therapy Associates, a psychotherapy practice in Haymarket. She welcomes reader's comments and questions and can be reached at <http://www.grouptherapyassociates.com> or by calling 703-644-8041.