



OVERCOMING

Myths

ABOUT

Marriage

By Jeffrey H. Larson, Ph.D.

Most couples have never participated in marriage education of any kind except what they read in newspapers and magazines. No one told them when they married what adjustments they would need to make in the early years of marriage nor did they realize the myths about marriage that they would likely come to believe. Few of us know on our wedding day that our relationship will go through predictable stages as we adjust to being husband and wife. Even for those who have lived together for some time, being married is cognitively, emotionally, legally, spiritually, and socially different. Our expectations of each other change some when we assume the husband and wife roles. For example, one of you

is now expected to manage “the” checkbook effectively. Now you expect to discuss large purchases with each other rather than unilaterally making expenditure decisions as you did when you were single. As we try to make adjustments we are, unfortunately, vulnerable to developing myths about each other and how to make these changes. But first, let’s look at the inevitable changes that occur over time.

Not only do we now expect more of each other but we fail to understand that our love for each other is going to change too, from more romantic love to more companionate love (friendship). I call these changes the three stages of marriage. All couples experience these three stages in some

form or another. Some couples go through these relationship stages faster than others. Some get stuck in one for significant periods of time. Let's look at how the problem of marital malaise gets started and solutions to not getting stuck.

### *The Three Stages of Marriage*

Most marriages develop through three stages, in this order:

1. Romantic love
2. Disillusionment and distraction
3. Dissolution or adjustment with resignation or contentment.

#### Stage 1: Romantic Love Stage

Most couples get married in a state of romantic love that many describe as ecstasy. Ecstasy comes from a Greek word meaning “deranged.”<sup>1</sup> That is, our love at this stage in our marriage is primarily sexual, passionate, irrational, and based on physical attraction. It's all the more ecstatic because communication at this stage is relatively easy with much rapport. At this stage you have not had to make any big sacrifices; you have experienced no major crises yet. You intentionally, although somewhat unconsciously, show your partner only your good side—for example, watching your physical appearance and dress so that you continue to dazzle your partner and make him think he's the luckiest guy in the world.

Our expectations of our partner and the relationship are also irrational during this honeymoon period. We may expect our partner to meet all of our needs for acceptance and love. You may see him as the ultimate protector or her as the ultimate nurturer, your fountain of affection and

caring. You finally found the person who will heal your inner wound from the past and meet all your emotional needs. Romantic love like this is mother nature's way of attracting men and women to each other long enough for a more stable and meaningful relationship to take seed and begin to grow. In this stage of marriage, couples report, “Oh, I love him so much—he's perfect for me!” “I want to make you the happiest woman in the world!” “You have made me the happiest guy in the world!” It's like whirling around in a tornado of romance. Great fun! Mother nature has done her job well! But after a while it's time to settle in to being really married and experiencing both the highs and the lows of married life. Couples then move into stage 2.

#### Stage 2: Disillusionment and Distraction.

The problem with romantic love is that inevitably, sooner or later, it slips away. “The honeymoon always ends. The bloom of romance always fades.”<sup>2</sup> As romantic love diminishes, other challenges begin to appear in our personal and couple lives. Daily life is stressful by itself. Learning to share the bathroom, working out marital roles (who cleans the toilet or takes out the garage, who initiates sex, who manages the checkbook, and so on) and the stress associated with balancing two careers and still making time for each other all take a toll on us physically and emotionally, and the vitality of our relationship suffers. These occurrences are not inherently bad—they are an unavoidable part of life. But they are more difficult transitions than we thought they would be. In addition, some of our fantasies just do not come true; for example, we are surprised and even shocked at realizations like these:

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- He isn't always thinking of me.
- She doesn't call me every day at work to say, "I love you."
- He is a bit more overweight than I originally thought. How did I miss that?
- I thought she was going to work too. Now I have to make all the money, and there isn't enough.
- Wow, does he have a temper when he doesn't get enough rest! Where did that come from?

In short, marriage ultimately disappoints you as well as fulfills you. This natural but painful difference between fantasy and reality (discovered months after the wedding) commonly leads to disillusionment.

It's also disillusioning to discover that meshing two distinct personalities is more challenging than you thought it would be. Personality traits not revealed during courtship or the honeymoon start to appear when you're under stress—anger not seen before, depression on certain days of the month, or irritability that sometimes goes on for days.

Perhaps most shocking, now your partner shows you his dark or more basic side: he "forgets" to shave while on vacation, throws his clothes directly on your path to the bathroom, and scratches where it itches! In other words, having won over our partner by showing her our most positive behaviors (this used to be called the courtship) and then marrying her, we now relax (sometimes too much) and show her the other side. This other side does not stimulate romantic love! We're caught in a situation where we want to change our partner and may even regret marrying him. All this is normal—Marriage Adjustment 101! (Does that make you feel any better? I hope so!)

Add to these changes in the relationship and your circumstances a stressful event or a crisis (buying a home, the arrival of children and the stresses of parenting, a chronic illness, a miscarriage, loss of a valued job) and the resultant sacrifices you have to make to get along with your partner, and it's enough to send many couples into a tailspin! Life also holds out many natural distractions that cause us to focus away from our marriage and onto other life necessities, such as raising children; working and paying the bills; advancing in our careers; engaging in hobbies, sports, recreation, television, the internet; and PTA or other community meetings.

None of these distractions are inherently harmful—they just rob of us of time together as a couple, unless we can arrange to do some of them together (hobbies, sports, children). We become too busy for our marriages. And dating activities as a couple cease entirely, especially after children have come into the picture.

This combination of disillusionment and distractions also hurts your sex life. Two of the most common causes of sexual problems in marriage—stress and fatigue—are the result of many of the distractions I've listed. We become "spread too thin" emotionally and physically, leaving too little time and energy for our relationship, let alone our sex life. And sexual boredom may occur as a result of not being more creative and playful in our private moments.

Now some good news! Most couples make it past this stage and end up with a vital, satisfying marriage. You can, too. Let's look at what happens in the next stage to determine where you will eventually settle.

### Stage 3: Dissolution or Adjustment with Resignation or Contentment

By the time couples get to the end of stage 2, they know there is something wrong with their marriage. Feeling disappointed and discontent, the

PERHAPS  
MOST SHOCKING,  
NOW YOUR PARTNER SHOWS



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question is, “What should we do?” You have three options.

1. You can give up, *dissolving the relationship* through separation or divorce.

2. You can just keep on trying to survive, day to day, in an unsatisfying marriage—I call this *adjusting with resignation*. There is little love in such a marriage. Couples in resigned marriages progressively grow apart, and their lives end up on parallel tracks—much like living with a roommate who has her own life and rarely shares it with you. They stay together because they are afraid or feel too guilty to divorce, fear the effects of divorce on their children, cannot afford to split. They lead lives of marital mediocrity and think there are no good solutions out there for them except to keep plodding along.

3. You can decide to be more content. *Adjusting with contentment* occurs when you still love each other but your love has become more like a good friendship with some passion thrown in. Altruistic love may have developed by now too. This is the self-giving kind of love that is kind and patient, not demanding. It’s the kind of love defined by Harry Stack Sullivan, a famous psychiatrist, as “when the satisfaction or the security of another person becomes as significant as is one’s own satisfaction or security.”<sup>3</sup> I’m suggesting that a successful marriage is based on all three types of love: romantic, companionate, and altruistic. Adjusting with contentment also requires an awareness of your marital situation and the areas you want to improve in your relationship to become more content. Then add commitment to improving your marriage and the tools with which to do it. With some dedicated work and adjustments, your marriage will improve. The purpose of this article is to help you begin this process, which will ultimately result in greater contentment.

### It’s Your Decision

So, where is your marriage right now? Probably in stage 2 or 3. What do you want to

do? Unfortunately, too many couples choose alternative 1 or 2. Everyone knows the divorce rate in the United States is too high. But few people acknowledge that the number of unhappy but stable (unseparated or undivorced) couples in the country is nearly as high as the divorce rate (currently about 40 percent of couples who marry will eventually divorce). What a shame, to live your married life in resigned misery or mediocrity. It’s a national health problem.

### The Benefits of Knowing the Stages and Options

Understanding the stages of relationship development and your action options will benefit you in the following ways:

- It normalizes the stresses, changes, and challenges you face so that you no longer feel like you’re different from others or all alone in this.
- It helps you assess where your marriage currently is so that you know what to expect next and better understand the options open to you.
- It helps you realize that you can make conscious choices about your marital future. You can avoid accepting an unsatisfying but stable marriage when you know you can have much more.
- It encourages you to make a conscious choice together to do option 3 above rather than option 1 or 2.

### Myths About Marriage that Sustain Problems

It’s not enough to know that marriage changes over time. Myths about marriage—beliefs we hold as true that have no basis in reality or scientific evidence—also help sustain, and sometimes create, marriage problems. To assess your beliefs in marital myths, rate how much you agree or disagree with each of the statements in the worksheet on the following page.<sup>4</sup>

YOU HIS DARK OR MORE BASIC SIDE...

## Belief in Marital Myths

Circle Your Responses Below

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Strongly Agree	Agree
1. If my spouse loves me, he should <i>instinctively</i> know what I want and need to be happy.	1	2	3	4	5
2. No matter how I behave, my spouse should love me simply because she is my spouse.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I can change my spouse by pointing out his inadequacies, errors, and other flaws.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Either my spouse loves me or doesn't love me; nothing I do will affect the way she feels about me.	1	2	3	4	5
5. The more my spouse discloses positive and negative information to me, the closer I will feel to her and the greater our marital satisfaction will be.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I must first feel better about my partner before I can change my behavior toward him.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Maintaining romantic love is the key to marital happiness over the life span for most couples.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Marriage should always be a 50-50 partnership.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Marriage can fulfill all of my needs.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Couples should keep their problems to themselves and solve them alone.	1	2	3	4	5

For each of the myths you agreed with, think of your reasoning in support of the myth. For example, who taught you this myth? What evidence do you have that this myth is true or false? Your belief-in-myths score is high if you agreed or strongly agreed with five or more of the myths. If you agreed or strongly agreed with three or four myths, your score is moderate. Agreeing with two or fewer is a low myth score. The more myths you marked "Undecided" to "Strongly Disagree," the better your understanding of the true nature of marriage and what it takes to be happily married.

### Debunking the Myths

Let's go into more detail on these ten myths about marriage. We'll see why each myth is false and provide an alternative, more realistic belief for

each myth. I believe that if you can rid yourself of your beliefs in these myths and start thinking more realistically about marriage, you will have taken an important step toward a more satisfying and ultimately easier experience in improving your marriage.

#### The ESP Myth

The myth: *If my spouse loves me, he should instinctively know what I want and need to be happy.*

This is referred to as the ESP or extrasensory perception (mind reading) myth because it erroneously suggests that spouses can read each other's minds and that only if they do are they really loving people. This is simply not true! Many divorced couples remember saying, "If he had really loved me, he would have *automatically* known what I needed." Research shows that even spouses married for a long time (twenty-five years or more)

do not necessarily know or understand each other significantly better than couples married for a shorter period of time. Someone once explained this using a prisoner example: two prisoners may have spent twenty-five years together but still know very little about each other. Might the same not be true of spouses?

The point is, you have to communicate *clearly* about what you want and need from your partner for her to start meeting your needs. And it's not unrealistic to expect to repeat yourself sometimes. This is because all of us have a lot on our minds, along with all of those conflicting interests and stresses (kids' needs, bosses' needs, and so on).

The Reality: *If my spouse really loves me, she will openly and respectfully tell me what she needs and not expect me to read her mind.*

#### The "I'm-Good-Enough-Just-As-I-Am" Myth

The myth: *No matter how I behave, my spouse should love me simply because she is my spouse.*

This myth suggests that my own existence regardless of my neglectful, obnoxious, or abusive behavior should make you love me, automatically. I once heard a husband say to his wife in marital therapy, "You should love me for who I am—it's your duty! When you signed that piece of paper [the marriage certificate] you committed to me regardless of what I do!" He used this duty statement as a manipulation to keep her in their abusive marriage.

But the fact is, my feelings for you are largely based on how you treat me. If you treat me consistently poorly, don't expect me to love you as a result. I may still be committed to our marriage because I think you can change and become more loving, but don't expect love to come automatically.

The reality: *Your spouse will love you to the extent that you are loveable, and that's based largely on your behavior.*

#### The Finger-Pointing-Will-Change-Him Myth

The myth: *I can change my spouse by pointing out his inadequacies, errors, and other flaws.*

No one likes to be negatively confronted or blamed. That's human nature. And to be reminded



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regularly that you're a creep is even worse! The more you remind me of my inadequacies, the less I want to change because after one or two requests, it now becomes a power struggle. This is especially true for husbands. No man likes to think he is controlled by a woman (or anyone else, for that matter!). If you repeatedly hound him (nag), even though he may actually want to change his behavior as you would like him to, he probably will not because then you win and he losses.

Perhaps you have heard the expression "Catch 'em doing something good." Reinforcing positive behavior works better than regular punishment for negative behavior. But it does not include nagging!

The reality: *I can positively influence my spouse's behavior if I know how, and that can be learned. But nagging does not work.*

#### The Love-in-a-Vacuum Myth

The myth: *Either my spouse loves me or does not love me; nothing I do will affect the way she feels about me.*

This myth is similar to "I'm good enough just as I am" in its assumption that feelings and behaviors are separate and unrelated. Spouses who believe this myth are often just using it as an excuse not to change themselves.

The fact is, if I exhibit loving behaviors, her love for me will increase in a reciprocal way. To prove my point, just ask your spouse to complete this sentence: "I feel loved when you (list ten specific behaviors)." Then choose one or two of the specific behaviors on her list to start doing sincerely every day for one month. At the end of the month, ask your partner if she feels more love for you. She will. Love does not exist in a vacuum—it is strongly influenced, day-to-day, by our behavior and our partner's behavior.

The reality: *If I behave more lovingly, she will love me more.*

### The Let-It-All-Hang-Out Myth

The myth: *The more my spouse discloses positive and negative information to me, the closer I will feel to her and the greater our marital satisfaction will be.*

So we should tell our partner everything that is on our mind, right? Just let it all hang out. After all, you're soulmates. *Wrong!* Recently, marriage researchers have discovered the 5 to 1 rule.<sup>5</sup> This holds that for every destructive or hurtful thing I say to my partner, I have to say five positive things to balance the books. That shows that negative comments or disclosures are more emotionally powerful than positive comments or disclosures. So watch what you disclose to your partner. First, ask yourself, Is telling her this going to seriously hurt her? Is this information that she really doesn't need because it has little influence on our marriage? Here are some examples of things better left undisclosed:

- Something embarrassing from your past that is unrelated to your current relationship—for example, “Last year you really embarrassed me at the company picnic with your silly jokes.”
- Negative thoughts or feelings about someone that has no constructive purpose if told to your spouse—for example, “You know, your father is really a slob. I don't know how your mother puts up with him!”
- Unsolicited negative comments about your partner's weight, looks, dress, style, hairdo, and so on. It is better just to pay a compliment when you notice something you like.

The Reality: *The expression of positive thoughts and feelings increases marital satisfaction the most. If you have something negative to disclose, watch how you do it so as not to offend.*

### The My-Feelings-Have-to-Change-First Myth

The myth: *I must first feel better about my partner before I can change my behavior toward him.*

It will be easier to give him more compliments or do him more favors if you first feel more love for him, but how do you change your feelings first? Where is the magic potion? Therapists have little advice on how to feel better first.<sup>6</sup> In comparison, we know a good deal about how to help change your behavior. And it's much more practical to focus on overt behavior first. Besides, the reciprocal relationship between feelings and behavior means that if you change one (behavior), the other (feelings) will change, too. Let me issue this warning: If you wait until you feel better about him first before changing your behavior, you will probably never change your behavior!

The Reality: *Part of being married is learning that you sometimes have to do things for your partner that you would rather not do, simply to please your partner.<sup>7</sup> As he becomes happier, he will likely reciprocate with pleasing behaviors too, and you, too, will be happier (your feelings change). Plus, you will feel much better about yourself as a result of changing your behavior first without hesitating too long.*

### The Romantic-Love-Is-the-Key Myth

The myth: *Maintaining romantic love is the key to marital happiness over the life span for most couples.*

Having read my earlier comments about the relative importance of companionate love versus romantic love in preserving long-term marriages, you may not have agreed with this statement!

Although maintaining romantic love has some positive effect on long-term



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THE  
*Romantic-Love-Is-the-Key* MYTH:  
MAINTAINING ROMANTIC LOVE IS THE  
FOR MOST COUPLES.

marital satisfaction, you need to become friends, preferably before or shortly after marriage. You also need to become more altruistic. These three kinds of love can together preserve your relationship over the life of your marriage.

The reality: *It takes compassionate and altruistic love, too, to preserve your marriage.*

### The It's-A-50-50-Deal Myth

The myth: *Marriage should always be a 50-50 partnership.*

Unfortunately, circumstances and individuals are too complicated to assume that we can always maintain equal inputs into our marriage. Some days (say, when my wife is sick) I may have to put 90 percent into my marriage while my wife only puts in 10 percent. The next week, that could change to a 10 percent – 90 percent ratio due to illnesses, job responsibilities, child-rearing problems, or other circumstances. Over the short term, you cannot have a 50-50 marriage. Over the *long-term*, happily married couples report more of a 50-50 contribution to their marriage. In addition, couples who try to split everything equally forget that some things in marriage may be best done by the person most competent at it—for example, car repairs may be easy for me but difficult for you. So I'll do all the car repairs. That's fair to both of us but may not reflect a 50-50 marriage as far as car maintenance goes.

The sign of a troubled marriage, incidentally, is when spouses keep tally sheets in their heads, counting everything they do for their partner and resentfully saying, "You owe me!"<sup>8</sup>

The reality: *Your marriage will be stronger if you focus on pleasing your partner and making sure you are doing all you reasonably can to contribute without keeping a tally.*

### The Marriage-Is-the-Ultimate-Answer Myth

The myth: *Marriage can fulfill all of my needs.*

Newly married couples often think this, but after a few months of marriage, they discover the reality that they have many needs and marriage can only fulfill some of them. Each person is responsible for getting those other needs met. For example, a young bride complained that her new husband wouldn't sit and listen to her (endlessly, it seemed to him) at the end of the day and meet her need for meaningful conversation and understanding. He was not used to such long, intimate conversations and quickly tired and eventually got irritated. Luckily, she soon started sharing more of her feelings with close friends, without concluding that her marriage was poor because her husband didn't meet all her needs for conversation.

The fact that you're married does not alter the fact that you should still expect to meet many of your needs outside of marriage, just as before you were married. For example, my need to play golf has never been fulfilled with my wife as my golf partner. She just doesn't like the game. My male buddies do, and so they fill my need for golf course companionship, competition, conversation, and so on.

The reality: *Marriage can fulfill many of my needs, and the others can be fulfilled by other appropriate people.*

### The Keep-Quiet-and-Do-It-Alone Myth

The myth: *Couples should keep their problems to themselves and solve them alone.*

This is called the intermarriage taboo.<sup>9</sup> That is, it is taboo to talk to others about your marriage or to seek help outside of marriage. In America we value privacy, but not all cultures do. Too many couples keep their problems to themselves until it is too late—the marriage is so dysfunctional that it's really impossible to repair even by marital therapists. I admire a spirit of independence—we can do it ourselves—but another sign of strength is

knowing when to seek outside assistance to improve your marriage.

There are many loving and professional people ready and willing to help you resolve your marital problems—close family members, friends, clergy, and therapists. Many of our life problems are, after all, solved through others who care. Who cares deeply about you and your marriage who could serve as a sympathetic ear or a source of encouragement or advice? It needs to be a person who can hold confidences like a good friend or a professional. The more objective the person (such as clergy or marital therapist), the better.

The reality: *Keeping your problems quiet and going it alone often leads to failure. Get trusted others to help you.*

### What's Next?

Now that you better understand where your marriage stands in the stages of marriage model and you are thinking more realistically about your relationship and how individuals change, you are ready to more objectively assess or evaluate the condition of your marriage and set goals for improvement. It may be time for a “marriage tune-up”.

Tune-ups are relatively easy to do, inexpensive, take little time, and focus on identifying your assets and liabilities as a couple. Most can be done without the assistance of a licensed marital therapist. In cases where problems are more chronic or serious, couples can take their tune-up results to a professional for assistance.

An approach based on good theory and research on what predicts marital satisfaction is called *The Great Marriage Tune-Up Book* (Larson, 2004). Using this tune-up manual, couples assess their individual traits (e.g. personality traits), couple traits (e.g. communication skills) and contextual or environmental traits in which their marriage

functions (e.g. stress from outside sources.) Guidelines are given for how to use the results (like an x-ray of your marriage) to celebrate your assets and improve on your liabilities. The whole process takes only 3-4 hours.

Other resources for couple assessment and enrichment can be found at this website: [www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com). Enrichment approaches like tune-ups are more preventive than treatment. Prevention is less expensive, time consuming, scary, inconvenient, and stressful; and, it's more private than therapy. It is the thing to do to vitalize your marriage! *mf*

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