

Marriage and Family Corner

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During a marriage counseling session, one of my favorite conversations starts when I say, “Tell me about your wedding vows.”

Couples often describe repeating vows provided by the officiant, the personal vows they wrote themselves or the vows chosen from a book or the Internet — everything from the solemn, romantic, funny, brief, detailed, religious, irreverent and poetic.

The vows, the process by which they are chosen, and current reflections on those decisions, reveal the personalities and values of the couple, as well as how they approach intentions and needs.

Focusing on intentions and values may promote growth in any relationship, including for those couples looking to enhance their marriage or to address problems.

With these reflections, the solidity of the relationship may be affirmed and may help the couple refocus on values and intentions that help make up this foundation and guide growth.

Other times, the couple recognizes a need to adjust intentions and values to fuel “healthy connection,” thereby strengthening their foundation.

Of course, a couple’s values and intentions may evolve, especially after many years together.

Either way, consideration of this foundation is useful in enhancing a relationship or addressing problems.

I often talk about the benefit of premarital therapy and other purposeful ways to prepare for a healthy and happy marriage.

I also frequently quote the title of the first chapter in David Schnarch’s “Passionate Marriage: Sex, Love, and Intimacy in Emotionally Committed Relationships” in asserting, “Nobody’s ready for marriage — marriage makes you ready for marriage.”

These ideas may appear to be contradictory, but, instead, they are complementary. In fact, practice and commitment to regularly evaluate if actions and choices fit intentions and values or not is the best preparation for the process that follows to get the couple “ready” for marriage.



Intentions, Assumptions and Expectations

It is even more useful than knowledge and perfected skills, although they are also crucial.

Schnarch describes marriage as a crucible in which the partners are made ready for intimacy (on all levels, not just sexually) by handling inevitable conflicts, misunderstandings and mismatched needs or wants.

Couples tend to approach stress, change and conflict throughout their relationship in the same way that they prepare for their marriage. So, when that preparation is focused on intentions and values, which support a healthy relationship, the couple sets a fruitful tone.

It is important to consider the differences between intentions and expectations.

Focus on personal intentions is about what one intends to do, how one intends to be and in what one intends to be involved.

Intentions are not about what the other person will do or be, but about how one will interact with the other person, even when one feels disappointed, sad, angry or hurt about what the other is or does.

Maintaining focus on intentions and values to guide actions and reactions is difficult when dealing with disagreements and differences between the needs, wants and goals of the partners. Still, it is critical for growth.

Expectations often lead to assumptions.

Unconfirmed assumptions often lead to misunderstandings, mistrust, and disconnection. That is not to say that it is damaging to discuss what one wants in a relationship and from a partner. Quite the contrary; open discussion of wants and needs is a hallmark of a healthy relationship, as long as these discussions are consistent with healthy intentions and values.

Providing information about oneself and making relevant requests of a partner, while being willing and able to explore options related to requests, typically yields growth and satisfaction, even when all requests are not met.

Of course, the presence of abuse, manipulation or control by one partner over the other, blocks this growth and satisfaction and so must be addressed by decisions about boundaries and actions for one's own safety.

It is also important to note the difference between requests and demands.

Respectfully asking a partner to do something requires intention toward self-care and adjustments when the answer is no — or the answer involves negotiation and compromise.

Demanding a partner to do something involves attempts to control the partner, instead of control one's self.

In the excitement of planning a wedding, couples may fail to fully appreciate that they are planning a

life, not just an event. The process of planning and preparing can bring awareness of strengths of the two partners and of the relationship.

It can bring awareness of needed skill improvement for communication and coping, as well as for more information from one another or from trusted people, including experts.

Courageously, readily and consistently addressing these needs will help build a satisfying life together. In the short term, this practice is far more scary and difficult than waiting to see what will happen, or simply doing what you have always done, expecting your partner to match you.

But, the joy of growth and connection is much more rewarding than the satisfaction of being right.

Here's to your joy in matching your intentions and values to your actions and reactions in your marriage and across all of your relationships.

For more information on available services or to discuss information in this column, contact:

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