



Chapter 3. Life Isn't a Movie

When I was a little girl I always dreamed about what my married life would be like. Until recently everything was like I'd dreamed it would be. I met the perfect guy, our wedding was like a fairytale, and we set up this adorable first apartment. But then it turned into some dull version of reality TV, complete with all the nitpicking and petty jabs. I know it's pretty silly to expect us to act like we did when we were dating. But I sort of expected us to come across like couples do in the movies, all content, arm in arm, morning coffee together, that kind of stuff. Worse, I look at my friends and see how happy they seem to be. Was I just stupid to expect married life to be special?

Ann from Seattle

We all have romantic illusions of what married life will be like. It's so easy to watch a movie and imagine ourselves in a life just like the main characters, holding hands against a sandy sunset. But as we all know, it's dangerous to expect real life to end "happily ever after."

The success of a marriage isn't predicted by how high the flame of passion burns. Rather, a solid marriage is like a slow-burning fire: sometimes it sparks ... sometimes dark coals hide the underlying heat ... and without each partner adding wood to feed it, it will burn out.

Perfection is a Dangerous Illusion

No one is perfect. Not your spouse, not you. A relationship between two imperfect human beings will certainly never be 100% perfect. However, one secret of happily married couples is that they don't expect perfection. They know that they will always fight, always disagree, and often let one another down in the little things. But they are confident in the big things: commitment, trust, and respect.



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Examine Your Expectations of Marriage

It's so easy to slide into married life. You have been dating for some time, perhaps have even lived together, and you may wonder why have a marriage certificate should change anything.

It does. Marriage is more than simply an extension of dating. It introduces a completely new dynamic into an established relationship. Suddenly, neither of you have to please the other person in order to win them over; you've already won the prize. All the energies you invested in your courtship can now be turned to other areas of life, such as your careers or home-buying. As both of you come to take your relationship for granted, you may find yourselves feeling more like roommates sharing a house than lovers sharing a life.

Married life *is* special. It is the chance to experience a higher level of intimacy than you've ever experienced with anyone before. It is the chance to learn to work in the most complete partnership you've ever known. But it may not look like what you imagined.

Did you and your husband discuss what each of you imagined married life would be like before you took your vows? He may have imagined a life of going to work each day, sitting at the television each night, and enjoying the warmth of a bed shared with you. You may have imagined morning coffee, weekends spent on long road trips, shopping to furnish the apartment together. Thus, your husband may be quite content in *his* vision of married life ... without realizing that his vision isn't the same as yours.

Dreams Don't Have to Come True

If you are feeling disappointed in your marriage without anything specific to pin it on, take the time to examine your old expectations of marriage. What did you dream that married life would be like as a child? Did you see yourself eating with your partner each night, or swinging on a porch in the evening? Chances are, the dreams you had of marriage as a child were quite fuzzy and nonspecific. Such dreams give you a good feeling, but they are only two-dimensional pictures of a marriage—which is always a complex and multidimensional thing.

Those dreams served their purpose then. They encouraged you to visualize an adult role, practice partnership skills, and seek healthy relationships. However, now that



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you are married, you need to create new dreams that are based on the individual with whom you have fallen in love ... and preferably shared by him as well.

Creating Marital Goals

Do you feel that your husband and yourself are on the same wavelength in terms of where your married life is going? Many marriages fail because husbands and wives lack a sense of shared purpose. They married because they were in love, but aside from those loving feelings they didn't work on creating a higher meaning for their marriage. As a result, when they fall out of love, the marriage ends.

Successful marriages involve more than just a common feeling of love for the other person. Successful marriages *go somewhere*. Each spouse understands the other spouse's dreams, understands how their personal dreams fit into their shared dreams, and values common goals.

Dream constructively by creating your own marital goals. What can you imagine your spouse and yourself doing in five years' time? Ten? Be specific. Imagine more than simple things like making a home together or helping one another through the aging process. Do you imagine yourselves traveling? Having a child? Moving to the countryside? Starting your own business? Becoming more physically active?

Be Realistic

Now ask yourself whether those dreams are realistic. Does your spouse share similar goals? Do you travel well/work well together? Do you have any financial or other kinds of limitations that would prevent you from reaching those goals?

Dreams that cannot possibly come true are *not* a sound foundation for visualizing a marriage. For example, if either your or your spouse is unable to have children, it will only make you unhappy to imagine biological children as a necessary ingredient for the perfect marriage. A more realistic dream would be to raise a child, as you could then look for other options such as adoption or foster care.



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Share with Your Spouse

Now, share your ideas with your spouse and ask him what his dreams for your marriage are.

When your dreams are:

1. mutual,
2. involve participation from the both of you, and
3. can be acted upon,

they are much more satisfying ... and you'll be able to do more than just wonder why your marriage isn't like that fuzzy, golden-tinged ideal in your head.

Now Act

Thinking about your marriage is the first step; talking about it is the second. Now, you are ready for the third and most exciting step: acting on what you've learned. Making plans and sharing dreams won't create a sense of marital purpose unless you *do* something about them.

When you and your spouse work together towards a shared goal—even something small like eating a healthful meal three times a week, or working through the exercises in this book—you create a sense of *marital unity*. You act in concert with one another and feel a common sense of accomplishment. You can learn more about your partner by working together in this way than you could have in a weekend of conversation ... and you'll learn valuable partnership skills.

As a result, you'll stop gauging your marriage against an ideal in your head and start gauging it against the goals that you both set together.

Resisting Unhealthy Expectations

You'll always compare your marriage to the married couples that you see around you. Yet it's important to remember that when you see someone else's marriage, you are only seeing the surface. The couple that you thought was so happily married, that seemed so much in love, may be divorced by the end of the week.



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Don't jump to quick conclusions and judge your marriage too harshly. Learn to identify unhealthy expectations through asking yourself if they fall into one of the following categories:

1. You can't clearly identify what you expect to yourself.
2. You want your partner to change into who you'd like him to be rather than accepting him as he is. (This does not include specific *behaviors* that you'd like him to change.)
3. You want your marriage or your partner to be like someone else's.
4. You want an instant transformation.
5. You know that your expectation is impossible.
6. Your expectation includes the word "always" or "never," as in: "We will never get angry at one another," "I will always be happy," or, "He will always take the garbage out."

Maintaining Healthy Standards

The following expectations are normal and necessary in a marriage.

1. That your spouse will respect you.
2. That your spouse will not betray your trust.
3. That your spouse will enjoy seeing you happy.
4. That your spouse will not intentionally hurt you physically, psychologically, or emotionally.
5. That your spouse will be committed to your relationship and its health.

Dreaming of the Marriage You Have

Even if your marriage is not ideal—and whose is?—chances are that there are many things that are wonderful about it. Now, your job is to change your ideal to match your circumstances. Think about how your marriage is already great ... and how it can be better. Focus on small, specific, achievable steps, like reserving one night a week to go on a "date" with your spouse, or avoiding any negative comments towards one another in the first half-hour after coming home from work.

In time, you may find that you *did* have the perfect marriage after all ... it was just hidden under unhealthy expectations.



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Exercise 4—Do Yourself

Complete the following sentences with as many words and phrases as come to your head:

- “When I was younger, I thought marriage would be like....”
- “I always thought that married people would do lots of _____ together”
- “When I look at other married couples I see....”

Exercise 5—Do Yourself

Think of the most “perfect” married couple you know. What do you like and/or admire most about them?

Think of the least “perfect” married couple you know. What do you like and/or admire least about them?



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Exercise 6—Do Together

Answer the following question by ranking the characteristics in order of importance, with 1 being the most important and 10 being the least:

What is the most important aspect to making a happy marriage?

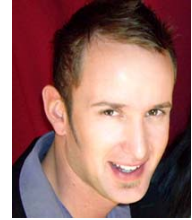
<u>His Ranking</u>	<u>Quality</u>	<u>Her Ranking</u>
_____	Communication	_____
_____	Compatibility	_____
_____	Frequent sex	_____
_____	Fun activities done together	_____
_____	Identical personalities	_____
_____	Lots of time spent together	_____
_____	Romance	_____
_____	Same values	_____
_____	Shared decision-making	_____
_____	Shared responsibilities for maintaining the home	_____
_____	Tolerance	_____
_____	Being seen by others as an ideal couple	_____

Exercise 7—Do Together

Make a list of the activities or small moments that each of you enjoy now that you are married. Make sure to be specific. For example:

- ...unlocking the door and hearing your spouse rattle about the kitchen*
- ...when your partner makes you a cup of coffee or hands you a cold drink without your asking*
- ...the feeling of your partner's warm body next to you as you sit together*
- ...the sounds your partner makes when he/she is content.*





Chapter 4. Combating Conflicts

My wife and I are having some really big problems right now. We have been married for three years now, and for the best part of that we have been really happy. But for the last while, it's just been impossible. I work really hard at an engineering plant during the day, while my wife stays at home and looks after our two-year-old son. I get home after work, tired from my long day and looking forward to being with my family. Instead, no one is home. When she turns up, she says she has been at a friend's or down at the mall. It's not like I expect her to have my dinner ready and on the table when I get in, but to have to come home and start cooking a meal isn't my idea of fun. I'm not a sexist pig, but I think I'm justified in thinking that she could be around when I get home at night and that we can share the chores. Our son also needs his dinner at a reasonable time; otherwise, he gets cranky. I tried talking to her a couple of times, but we had a huge fight about it. Why can't she think about anyone but herself?

Paul from Santa Fe

The likelihood of some sort of conflict in your relationship is inevitable. But blaming your partner for being selfish won't help. Neither will thinking that the only way to solve your conflict is your way: having your wife promise to be home when you come back from work. If you learn better ways of approaching conflicts from the start, you'll find that they resolve themselves.

The first step is to consider why you approach and respond to conflict situations in the way you do. For example, you didn't mention that your wife may feel tired and overwhelmed from having to deal with a child (in the "Terrible Twos," no less) all day long, alone in the house with no help. Going to the mall or to her friend's may provide her with emotional relief while entertaining the child with new environments and play situations. Had you started a discussion with your wife with recognizing her situation and how difficult it must be, as well as being understanding of the way she is dealing with the demands on her, she may have been much more open and receptive to listening to your needs.

The way in which you or your partner react to conflict situations can say a lot about the background you have had as a child or the influence your parents and others have



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had on you. Some of your reactions will be deeply engrained, and you may find it enormously difficult to change the ways in which you approach conflict situations.

Fortunately, you can learn new ways of dealing with tricky situations like the one above—without making your partner feel hurt, or their needs unimportant. One method is called negotiation.

What Is Negotiation?

Negotiation is a big word for a simple process. The definition of “negotiation” is a discussion intended to produce an agreement. In other words, a negotiation is not an argument. It isn’t a whole lot of talk for the sake of feeling better. It can’t occur when one of the two people doesn’t want to agree. It is a process that has one intended result: to get both sides to mutually come to an agreement.

The Negotiation Mindset

- ◆ Accept the conflict.
- ◆ Be aware of your feelings.
- ◆ Control your feelings.
- ◆ Assess your interests. Are they reasonable?
- ◆ Focus on positive outcome.
- ◆ Demonstrate flexibility.

In order to enter into the spirit of negotiation, you need to have the right mindset. You should accept that conflicts are going to happen. You should approach the situation in a calm and rational manner. You should be aware of your feelings and in tune with them enough to recognize when you are getting upset. The last characteristic is essential: you need to be able to control your feelings such that any interactions during the negotiation process are free from emotional volatility.

One important difference between negotiation and argument is that negotiation removes the emotion while arguments heighten it. When you argue, your heart rate goes up, and emotions feel more intense. You’ll do anything to be right, to get your way, to show the other person how much they’re wrong. Under the intoxicating effect of emotions, you may say or do things that you later regret.



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For negotiation to work effectively, you need to remove the emotions: specifically, anger, hate, and the need for revenge. If these feelings and motivations are still present when you begin your negotiation, you are unlikely to have a positive outcome.

Preparation for Negotiation

- ◆ Define the issue.
- ◆ Clarify interests and feelings.
- ◆ Rank priorities.

Before you begin, closely define the specific issue that you disagree on. Never deal with more than one issue at a time. Don't make the mistake of assuming that both of you have the same understanding of what is wrong. Allow your partner to define the problem in his or her terms, and do the same yourself. You may have very different understandings of the source of conflict.

Your interests need to be legitimate and reasonable. Something may be important to you, but you really need to determine whether it is a legitimate and reasonable issue from someone else's point of view. Choose your battles and decide whether the issue is important enough to warrant a negotiation.

Rank your thoughts in order of importance so that you can determine what things you are prepared to bargain on and what points you are unwilling to trade off. Make sure you are being reasonable if you genuinely want to negotiate a solution. Just as political conflicts are not solved in just one round of negotiation, you may need several. Don't set an unrealistic time limit for the negotiation process; be persistent and patient.

Brainstorm Possible Outcomes

Your focus should be on creating a positive outcome. In order to do this, you will need to avoid being defensive and concentrate on the exploration of workable outcomes. Brainstorming can be useful, as it enables you to examine a range of solutions rather than offering an either-or choice. Be flexible: no one "wins" in a negotiation, and you may have to give way on several points if you want to achieve an agreement.

Once you have both come up with a variety of possible outcomes, discuss them with one another. The most important thing to remember is that these are just proposals.



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Offering up ideas should not feel threatening, nor should you feel like you have to advocate every suggestion you offer. The key is to simply be creative and come up with as many solutions as you can. The more you have to choose from, the easier it will be to find a revised proposal that will take into account aspects of each of your priorities.

At this stage, remember to maintain an attitude of respect. If you have to be more formal and institute a meeting-style format, following Robert's Rules of Order, do so. You need to respect each other's feelings and ideas in this process if it is going to work.

Troubleshooting

This is not going to be an easy process. There will be times in the negotiation process that you will have disagreements and reach a temporary impasse. Don't despair! This is a normal part of the process. Try one of the following techniques to break the stalemate:

- ◆ Start the discussion process again from the beginning.
- ◆ Have some timeout and go for a walk.
- ◆ Try some of your different proposals.
- ◆ Think up some new proposals.
- ◆ Try some bargaining.

Looking Beneath the Conflict

When conflict situations arise, they are seldom tied to one issue. During the negotiation process, you may find that a larger problem lurks beneath the specific issue you'd agreed to discuss. Dealing with that issue first might be the positive outcome of the smaller problem.

