

How does our marriage grow?

EPC Seminar 24

All marriages grow through different stages

Each stage has its own challenges and its own possibilities.

At every stage there are things we can do to help our marriages grow even closer, stronger and happier.

Dream stage

Biblical example – Solomon and his bride (laughter and love)

When we're newly married we're often very caring and loving, but we're also still finding our way together.

- We try to do everything possible to make each other happy.
- We have high (and probably different) expectations of each other and our marriage.
- We try to avoid conflict, so we overlook our irritations and problems.
- We may be afraid of letting our partner see us as we really are.

At this stage we may need to:

- Establish our couple spirituality through times of prayer and worship.
- Build deeper trust and talk to each other about difficult and painful things.
- Learn how to discuss our differences openly, calmly and respectfully.
- Establish a pattern of enjoyable couple times – planning surprises and special times together.
- Explore what our parenting choices will mean for our relationship.
- Learn how to soothe and comfort each other through the inevitable distresses of life.

Disillusionment stage

Biblical example – Samson and Delilah (lack of trust and support)

This is the toughest stage. But it's also a very normal part of every growing relationship. Some couples stay in this stage for the rest of their lonely and unhappy lives together. Some couples separate and divorce because they can't find a way through this stage. But we'll never learn how to have the close, strong and loving relationships God intended us to experience, unless we find a way through our disillusionment into the discovery stage.

- Our high expectations are dashed by the reality of everyday stresses and strains.
- We become more aware of each other's differences, habits and limitations and they become more annoying to us.
- We argue, fight, blame each other, point out each other's weaknesses, and become easily irritated and frustrated with each other.
- We retreat into our own separate and over-busy worlds.
- We may try to soothe ourselves by becoming addicted to food, overwork, exercise, the Internet, gaming, pornography etc.

At this stage we may need to:

- Know there's hope beyond our disillusionment and pain.
- Find more useful and respectful ways to communicate with each other.
- Forgive the hurts of the past and find ways to move on together.

- Recognise each other's needs and begin to meet them.
- Do one kind thing a day for each other, even when we don't feel like it.
- Look for the times when we're actually getting it right, and wonder how we manage to do that.
- Find respectful and kind ways to manage our conflicts.
- Have more fun together. Find a baby-sitter if necessary.
- Do things together that show how much we value our relationship.
- Go to a Marriage Retreat.
- Read some of the books listed at the end of the handout.
- Visit www.2-in-2-1.co.uk and other Christian marriage websites for help, support, encouragement and ideas.
- Try specialist couple counselling. (The sooner couples attend counselling, the more effective the counselling is likely to be, and the fewer sessions will be needed. Counselling is much cheaper than a divorce!)

Discovery stage

Biblical example - Joseph and Mary (After Joseph's initial disillusionment over Mary's pregnancy they discovered the special plans God had for them as a couple.)

Every stage of marriage needs to be a discovery stage.

- There's always something new to learn about each other, and something new to learn about having an even happier marriage.
- Our commitment is vital for our growth. If we're not committed we're not going to work on our relationship, and we'll miss out on the ways God wants to use our marriage to help us grow.

At this stage of marriage we may need to:

- Rediscover the things that attracted us to each other, and find ways to cherish them again.
- Look for ways in which our differences are gifts from God that bless our relationship in some way.
- Learn to meet each other's needs for affection, attention, appreciation, acceptance, forgiveness, respect, support, comfort, security and encouragement.
- Help each other to reach our personal and couple goals
- Discover new ways to make our marriage the best it can be.
- Attend marriage seminars and retreats as often as we can.
- Read books and watch videos about marriage together.
- Renew our commitment to each other.
- Remember that God wants to help us have a wonderful marriage.

Depth stage

Biblical example – Zechariah and Elizabeth (complete trust)

This is the stage where we know each other intimately, as friends, lovers and children of God.

- We feel totally safe and secure in each other's love.
- We understand that our differences can also be our strengths.
- We treasure everything about the other person, even the challenging, annoying and difficult-to-understand things.

- We discuss our differences openly, respectfully and maturely, without intense arguing.
- We make a daily choice to love each other unconditionally in everything we do and say.
- We look at each other through God's loving eyes, and ask, 'How I can help my spouse experience more of God's love today?'

At this stage we may need to:

- Talk about how our relationship may change as we grow older, and discuss the plans we have for a happy and healthy retirement.
- Talk honestly with others about the ups and downs of our relationship so they can see how we've grown through our struggles.
- Mentor a younger married couple and support them through the different stages of marriage.
- Find a unique ministry we can share together, so that others can experience God's love through us.

Some things to think about and talk about together:

- Which stage of marriage do I think we're in?
- Which stage of marriage does my partner think we're in?
- What three things could I do to help our marriage move positively towards the discovery and depth stages?
- If I woke up tomorrow and our marriage was perfect, what would I be saying and doing differently than I did today? What difference would it make to our marriage if I chose to start doing those things today?
- God wants our marriage to be the best it can be. What ideas does He have that would bless our marriage?

For further discoveries:

- 'The Marriage Book' by Nicky and Sila Lee www.2-in-2-1.co.uk
- 'Laugh your way to a better marriage' DVD series by Mark Gungor – www.laughyourway.com
- 'The Five Love Languages' by Gary Chapman - www.5lovelanguages.com
- 'Hold me Tight' by Sue Johnson - www.holdmetight.com
- 'The Divorce Remedy' Michele Weiner-Davis - www.divorcebusting.com
- 'Seven principles for making marriage work', Dr John Gottmann and Nan Silver – www.gottmann.com

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