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Love You! Now, the Difficult Stuff ...

By ERIC V. COPAGE

AS Valentine's Day nears — always prime time for engagements — marriage experts advise asking some unromantic questions after posing the big romantic one.

Surprisingly few newly engaged couples seem to have these frank discussions, some of which can serve to avoid painful misunderstandings later on.

“Courtship-dating-romance is a process of collecting information about each other, sifting through it to decide ‘Should I continue with this person?’ ” said Marty Klein, a marriage and family therapist in Palo Alto, Calif. Once people decide they are in love, he said, too often they will duck tough conversations for fear of undermining what they see as a magical connection.

“People are afraid of this — it's a biggie,” said Rachel A. Sussman, a clinical social worker in New York. “Remember that ‘make believe’ and ‘happily ever after’ are Hollywood concepts, and there is absolutely nothing magical about a divorce.”

So, what issues should couples, both gay or straight, discuss before walking down the aisle?

“Companies have a mission statement so customers can see what the values of the company are, and so its purpose is clearly communicated,” said Nancy B. Irwin, a psychotherapist in Los Angeles. Those about to marry should, too, she said.

“For instance, couples assume they know what roles they will play in their marriage, when in fact they may be talking about something totally different,” she said.

Dr. Irwin said it was not uncommon for one person to have Donna Reed-era attitudes about men being the providers and women being in charge of the home. This may come as a surprise to their partner, leading to fissures in the relationship.

Amy Schoen, a life coach in Rockville, Md., said, “A couple's relationship values have to be aligned for it to go the distance.” She suggested, however, that couples avoid making an agreement too businesslike, and opt instead for the scented candle approach of writing what she called a “relationship vision statement.”

If having children is high on the list, couples should be very clear with each other about this goal, marriage experts said. With many people marrying later, there are matters beyond sorting out how soon they want to start a family. For example, some will face fertility issues. How couples deal with the related stress and expense can make or break a marriage, Ms. Schoen said.

“Fertility treatments — donor eggs, genetic testing, sometimes whether to use a surrogate — can go into the six figures,” she said. “And then there is the question of adoption. I’ve seen marriages break up over this because the partners were not on the same page.”

Others counsel that couples ought to have frank discussions about how they would handle having a child with physical or mental disabilities.

“Most people only think of the best moments — the fairy tale where every family member is totally healthy,” said Kami Evans, a [yoga](#) instructor in Westport, Conn., who works with children with cerebral palsy, autism, Down syndrome and similar conditions.

The consequences are so significant that the partners have to be perfectly in sync about how their lives will be affected.

Since sex is a predictable stumbling block in a long-term relationship, Ms. Sussman suggested that engaged couples ask each other, “How would we handle it if we find ourselves dissatisfied sexually with one another, or if we find ourselves physically attracted to someone else. And how would we make it better?”

“It’s a difficult dialogue,” said Ms. Sussman, who noted that in her experience, male gay couples tended to talk more openly about this issue than straight and lesbian couples did.

While agreeing with this approach, Dr. Klein, the family therapist, suggested a positive spin: “How do we stay sexually engaged with each other?”

With the economy in prolonged distress, some experts advise couples to share their [credit reports](#). People have been burned by not knowing their spouse’s financial situation, said Ms. Schoen, noting that “a friend was engaged to someone who was five figures in debt, but she never knew it.”

But how can one raise this issue without causing a level of distrust in the relationship? Dr. Klein, the author of “Sexual Intelligence: What We Really Want From Sex, and How to Get It,” said that demanding to see the report in black and white is a bad idea.

Why not just ask a general question about the person’s financial health, he said, adding, “If the other person lies about this, you have bigger problems than his or her credit.”

How you ask this and other questions is crucial.

“Make sure to set a tone that is conducive to open dialogue,” said Ms. Sussman, who is the author of “The Breakup Bible: The Smart Woman’s Guide to Healing from a Breakup or Divorce.” “Start off by being reassuring to each other and understanding that the goal is to get to know each other better.”

Nowhere is this more important than if you plan to marry someone who has been divorced. According to Linda Mainenti-Walsh, a matrimonial and family lawyer in Denville, N.J., asking to see a copy of the divorce complaint and settlement agreement goes a long way toward finding out “misconduct during the marriage, such as infidelity, drug and alcohol abuse, verbal and physical abuse toward the spouse and/or children and sexual deviancy.”

“Divorce settlement agreements will reveal assets and obligations to his or her former spouse and children that may impact you and/or your marriage,” she said.

Dr. Klein, however, cautioned that this is one demand that “represents the depth of mistrust.” A better route may lie in simply asking, “What happened?”

Yet with so many first and second marriages ending in divorce, Eric Marlowe Garrison, a clinical sexologist with practices in Richmond, Va., and New York, said that before tying the knot, couples should go as far as discussing how they might untie it someday.

“You want to consider this now, while your heads are clear and not full of anger or confusion,” Mr. Garrison said. Topics might include living arrangements (do they sleep in the same room or even the same house pending the divorce), which friends or family members might they turn to for advice, or what lessons have they learned from previous breakups.

Frederick Woolverton, a clinical psychologist in New York and an author of “Unhooked, How to Quit Anything,” begged to differ.

“Marriages are not made better by premarital agreements,” he said. Nor do prenups lead to better divorces. “To go into a marriage hedging one’s bets, as it were, goes very much against the emotional tenets of marriage: faith in self and other, faith in the union of self and other.”

Of course, many people bring unresolved problems into a marriage.

“Far too often, couples are trying to avoid the fate of couples they do not admire, like your divorced parents,” said Hal E. Runkel, a marriage and family therapist in Norcross, Ga., and author of “The Self-Centered Marriage.” “We usually end up similar to whatever we focus on.”

Mr. Runkel’s answer: Name two couples that you admire and would hope to emulate.

“Discussing who you’d like to follow may also reveal some very interesting expectations.”

Diana Kirschner, a psychologist in New York and the author of “Sealing the Deal,” said the advantage to this line of inquiry is that “it shows you what your partner wants to create in your lives.”

“If the ideal couple are workaholics and hardly see each other, that tells you one thing,” she continued. “If it is a couple who spend a lot of time with each other working on their relationship, that tells you something else.”

In a similar vein, Arielle Ford, the author of “Wabi Sabi Love: The Ancient Art of Finding Perfect Love in Imperfect Relationships,” suggested that those preparing for marriage ask each other, “Who should I have on speed dial for the days when I just can’t figure you out? What could be more important than having someone who can give you insight into your partner, such as why their hot buttons are hot?”

Having a go-to person is a good idea, Dr. Woolverton said. “When you’re overcome with feeling, an outside source can offer a fresh perspective.”

Helpful? Perhaps. But Dr. Klein noted that this is no substitute for direct communication.

“When you can’t figure out your mate, talk to your mate,” he said. “If she or he isn’t in the mood, just wait. Unless your kid’s hair is on fire, it can always wait a day or two.”

Gregory A. Kuhlman, a psychologist who directs the master’s program in mental health counseling at Brooklyn College, said, “It’s actually misleading to imply to couples that their happiness and success will be based on general compatibility.”

He said that with the exception of several red flag areas — compulsive behaviors like gambling and drug use, lack of disclosure of sexual orientation, violence and the desire to have or not have children — “It’s less important that couples agree than that they have compatibility in their approach to conflict.”

“For instance, if one is a super avoider and the other is confrontational, there will be friction in the marriage,” said Dr. Kuhlman, who with his wife, Patricia Schell Kuhlman, runs marriage training programs at stayhitched.com. So, the most important question is, what is your conflict management style, and how do you accommodate it to your partner’s?

“In the end it is not going to be any of these items that determines a couple’s happiness,” Dr. Kuhlman said. “It’s going to be whether they can maintain an overall positive atmosphere and sense of teamwork in their marriage. It’s inevitable that friction produced by their normal

differences will challenge this, and they must be intent on managing these positively and cooperatively.”

Talking Points

When asking difficult questions before marrying, couples should adopt a tone conducive to an open dialogue, experts advise. And do not ask them all at once.

“Many of these items are not at all romantic to discuss,” said Gregory A. Kuhlman, a psychologist. “But this is far outweighed by the value of understanding each other better.”

Some partners will shut down when uncomfortable questions are asked, yet others “are happy to be open books,” said Nancy B. Irwin, also a psychologist. “If your partner wants some privacy — as opposed to secrecy — you might want to honor that.”

Here are questions that should be asked before your wedding day:

What is our “mission statement” as a couple?

To what extent are you willing to go to have a family, medically?

What will we do if we find out our child has severe disabilities?

Who should I have on speed dial for the days when I just can’t figure you out?

Can you name two couples that you admire and would hope to emulate?

How do we stay sexually engaged with each other?

Will we share our [credit reports](#) with each other?

Should we have an exit strategy for the marriage, and if so, what would it be?

If married previously, why did it end and what did you learn from that relationship?

What are our conflict management styles, and are they compatible?



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