



Essential Topics to  
Discuss before Saying,

“I Do”



Mary Kay Cocharo, LMFT  
THE COUPLES THERAPIST

relationships. rediscovered. ♥ communication. restored. ♥ love. renewed.

# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
1 Lifestyle Expectations.....	4
2 Finances.....	5
3 Sexuality and Intimacy.....	7
4 Family of Origin.....	9
5 Religion and Spiritual Practices.....	11
6 Parenting.....	12
7 Career.....	14
8 Communication and Problem Solving.....	15
Conclusion.....	17

The average couple today will spend hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars preparing for their wedding day. I get it. It's an important lovely day. It's a party for family and friends and, in some cases, an opportunity for the bride's childhood dreams to come true. Over 50% of these well-spent couples will end up divorced. There doesn't appear to be any correlation between the lavishness of the wedding and the health and longevity of the marriage.

So, while you're doing everything you can to prepare for your wedding day, you might want to consider the 50 years that you'll, hopefully, be spending together after the honeymoon. Consider adding some **Marriage Preparation** to your **Wedding Planning**.

### **Why should we spend time and money on Premarital Counseling?**

I can hear you saying, "But we're in love. We don't need therapy". And you may not. Premarital Counseling is not always therapy in the classic sense. Yes, some couples do come in needing to resolve certain issues that surface in the face of wedding planning. I'm thinking specifically of financial pressures, religious differences and family dynamics.

But even if you're not exactly struggling with one another, now is a good time to learn better communication skills and put some important tools in your Marriage





Toolbox to give your new marriage every opportunity to succeed. Statistics show that couples who do some premarital counseling, divorce approximately 30% less than those who don't. It's like buying insurance.

### **Can't we just wait to see what happens?**

Research also shows that there is a window of opportunity during the year before the wedding and the six months or so after when couples can receive the optimum benefit from marriage preparation. Later, under stress, negative habits and relationship patterns may become established and be much harder to resolve.

If you can get premarital counseling early in your relationship, you can avoid much pain and agony, as well as circumvent the formation of bad relationship habits. With guidance from a trained Relationship Therapist, you can learn an effective way to communicate better, resolve conflicts and deepen intimacy.

### **So what are the 8 most essential topics to discuss before we get married?**



## 1 ♥ Lifestyle Expectations

Today's couples have more choices than ever before. Roles are no longer strictly defined by gender. There's a greater need for negotiating partnership as both wives and husbands are frequently engaged in careers outside the home.

Each individual comes to the marriage with a different idea of what life is supposed to look like. Often these expectations only come to light in the face of disappointment when it doesn't quite turn out the way you thought. It's important to have some deep conversations about how you are envisioning your future lifestyle and how it compares with your fiancé's vision. This includes everything from family, to home, to travel and beyond.

**Some important questions:** Why are we getting married? What do we as a couple want out of life? What role do you see me playing as husband or wife? How did your parents manage their roles in marriage? What did you like/dislike about their marriage? How will we manage the responsibilities in our home? Where do you see us living? Do you support my career plans? Do you want to travel? What do you think we'll be doing in 30 or 40 years? How often do you drink? What will we do during our free time?



## 2 ♥ Finances

Finances in marriage is a topic of big importance and yet is frequently overlooked or avoided. This is a topic you definitely need to discuss. Open communication and dialogue is the key to charting a successful financial future together.

With couples getting married slightly older now, you probably have functional financial plans in place. The challenge, then, is to put two perfectly good systems together and create a joint one. This requires transparency about income, debt and assets.

You might be thinking that finances is a straightforward topic requiring a pragmatic approach. While this is true, money is also an emotionally laden issue. In our culture, money represents security, but also power. Your relationship to money stems from your experiences in childhood and needs to be explored as you navigate the decisions you'll make about how to handle it in your marriage.





**Some important questions:** What assets and/or debts are we bringing into the marriage? Have you ever declared bankruptcy? What is your current annual income? Are you expecting future inheritances? Will we co-mingle our assets? Will we have joint or individual bank accounts? Who will primarily be in charge of the banking and bill paying? Will we create a pre-nuptial agreement?

Do we have trusts or wills? Will we take out life insurance? Do we have or want a financial advisor? How will we make up for finances lost during childbearing and rearing? Do either of us plan to further our education? How will we create a monthly budget? What are my/your/our financial goals? Are you more of a saver or a spender?

### 3 ♥ Sexuality and Intimacy

In today's world the focus of sex has shifted from a procreative morality to a relational and pleasurable experience. Intimacy is central for Western couples and follows expression of your inner life to an empathic, validating partner. Again, this requires deep communication.

In the early "falling in love" stage of a romantic relationship, nature helps us out with a chemical cocktail to get us going. We are flooded with cortisol, dopamine, oxytocin and vasopressin. These hormones increase our alertness, pleasure, motivation, trust, attachment, sexual arousal, attraction, and obsessive thinking, while decreasing our sadness, fear, and boredom. This is the time when you'll most likely feel most erotically attracted and attached to one another.

As nature has it, however, these chemicals wear off and in a few years you're faced with the need to consciously create erotic desire, curiosity, connection and passion. It's important to begin these conversations early in the relationship in order to build a strong foundation.



Additionally, you might find that there are areas of physical or emotional pain associated with sex or past sexual trauma that inhibits your full erotic expression. These issues may be best resolved with the help of a trained professional therapist.



**Some important questions:**

How important is it to you for us to have a strong, healthy sex life? What did you learn about sex from your family? Are you concerned that past sexual experiences could affect our marriage in a negative way? What do you think is the relationship between sex and



intimacy? Do you feel that we can talk candidly about our sexual expectations? How do you define fidelity? Do you watch pornography? Do we trust each other? Are you uncomfortable with my interactions with members of the opposite sex, either in person or online? Are you able to talk about what you want and need sexually?

## 4 ♥ Family of Origin

For better or for worse, we are all products of the childhoods we've lived. Our personalities, communication styles and ability to be intimate are all affected by our interactions with our early childhood caretakers. It's important for you to talk to each other about your past experiences as well as to discuss the role that your families will play in your life as a married couple.

You will want to talk about your parents' marriages and examine how what you learned from them might be influencing your expectations and beliefs about marriage. You may find that you have unrealistically positive expectations, or that you have unacknowledged negative expectations and fears stemming from having grown up with divorced or unhappily married parents.

You will also want to get a clear idea of your expectations regarding the amount of time each of you want to spend with your families once married, including how to celebrate holidays. Today, many couples find themselves

far away geographically from family, making it important to negotiate travel schedules and time spent.



**Some important questions:** What was your childhood like? Do you consider your family close? What values and customs do you want to bring from your family into our marriage? What do you like and

dislike about your family?  
About my family? What do you like and dislike about your parents marriage? How are our families similar? How are they different? Do you feel welcomed and accepted by my family? Do you have concerns that either family is over involved in our relationship? Do you worry that our families will interfere in the way we rear our children? How often would you like to spend time with family once we're married?



## 5 ♥ Religion and Spiritual Practices

Many couples tell me that although they attended church services in their youth, they “fell away” from those practices when they moved away from home. Like many of them, you may be finding yourself wandering back to your earlier beliefs and practices as you contemplate where to get married.

Some people gravitate toward partners with similar religious backgrounds when it comes to saying “I do”. For others, differences in their religious beliefs can be a source of stress and conflict, not only for them, but for their families, as well.

In either event, the time before marrying is a good time to talk about your beliefs, traditions, practices and expectations for the future. It’s wise to know what each of you are thinking, especially if you plan to bring children into the marriage. I can help you to explore your differences and similarities and come to decisions concerning the spiritual formation of your children.

**Some important questions:** Does religion play an important part in your life? Do you think faith and spirituality is important in marriage? Is it important to you, or your family, that we marry in a church or other religious setting? Do you believe in providing financial support to your place of worship? Will you be dissatisfied or resentful if I don’t share in your commitment to your faith? Do you expect us to pray together? How will we teach our values and beliefs to our children?



## 6 ♥ Parenting

You may be thinking that deciding who to marry is the most important decision you'll ever make. According to research, you're right! We all know, however, that a close second is the decision as to whether or not to have children. Children change our lives forever in a myriad of ways. Let's look at how gender impacts this decision.

For men in our culture, the primary task is to protect and provide for their loved ones. A man who loves his woman, will take this task seriously and may feel a lot of pressure to succeed. Men often feel an internal responsibility to provide as a part of their identity, *even when* their wives are also in good careers earning money. Having children adds to this task in a deep and profound way, and is therefore, a big decision.

For women, whether or not to have children is fraught with cultural and familial expectations. Many women are struggling to balance their internal "biological clocks" with the demands of career and financial stress. The decision to conceive is often complicated by infertility and employer demands.

It is imperative that you and your partner start the talks about children as early into your committed relationship as possible.







Unlike other areas of your life where compromise is possible (think, you want to eat out, I want to cook at home, let's order in!) you can't have half a baby if one of you is ready to move into parenthood and the other is against it. This is an area, where common desires and values are of the utmost importance.

Once the decision to have children is made, there are many other areas to negotiate: size of family, parenting

style, support and help, traditions, family involvement, schooling, and discipline to name a few.

**Some important questions:** Do you want to have children? How many children would you like to have? How long should we be married before starting a family? What kind of parent do you think I'll be? What is your parenting philosophy? Will one of us stay home after we have children? How will we balance our careers with the demands of parenting? How would you feel if we were unable to conceive? How do you feel about adoption? How were you disciplined as a child? How do you want to discipline our children? Do you have children already from a former relationship?

## 7 ♥ Career

Are you and your fiancé both working in busy demanding jobs or are you possibly building careers after years of education? If so, you're not alone. Dual careers have become both a personal goal and an economic necessity for many couples, particularly in high-cost regions such as Los Angeles. In recent years, families with two heads of household, in which both spouses pursue full-time careers, has become the most common family unit in American society.

The role expectations and boundaries between family and career are not always congruent, developing conflicts and issues between work and family life. The demands on your time, energy and other resources are great as you struggle to create and maintain a work-life balance. But there is hope. With hard work, good luck, clear goals, patience and a willingness to compromise, success is possible.

**Some important questions:** Do you fully agree with my occupation or career plans? Do we agree to consider each other and our family when making future career decisions? What are your goals and ambitions for our future? Do you have concerns that I'll become too involved in my work or career? Are you concerned about us not having enough time together? What importance do you give to social status, money, and possessions in our lives? What is your attitude toward working mothers? How much will your job take you away from home? How would you like to see us combine the demands of our careers with childrearing?



## 8 ♥ Communication and Problem Solving

In an ideal world we would all have the capacity to stay centered and present in the face of our spouse's upsetting behaviors. We would be able to employ these tools easily without emotional reactivity. The truth, however, is that it's difficult and requires coaching and practice.

John Gottman, PhD, a leading researcher in marital relationships has found that couples who stay married work to keep criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling (refusing to discuss) out of their relationships. He calls these "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse". Indeed, these patterns can become apocalyptic in your relationship, especially when repeated over time. In Premarital Counseling, you can begin replacing those habits with good, healthy communication patterns.



In my Communication Workshops for Couples, I teach you to speak your desires, to listen deeply to your partner for greater connection and compassion, to transform daily frustrations into behavioral requests, to dissolve deep conflict and bring safety and passion into your relationship.

**Some important questions:** Do you think I'm a good listener? Do you feel you can express yourself clearly to me? Are there issues that you're unwilling to discuss with me? Do you value avoiding conflict under all circumstances? Do you think that I provide you with emotional support when you need it?

Would you prefer to solve issues immediately or take some time apart to think about them? Would you like to change something about the way we solve differences together? Do we argue about the same issues over and over? Do you feel like I'm trying to "win" when we fight? How do you feel about the way that I express my frustration or anger? Do you ever feel put down by me?



## Conclusion



### **In brief:**

Couples today face more demands and have less support than ever before. The typical marriage is complex and includes managing two careers while rearing children without much extended family support. Gone are the days where Mom and Dad live next door and are available to help in tangible ways. Parents are likely to still be young and vital enough to be working, traveling and pursuing their own interests. It is more

necessary than ever to build a strong foundation with your spouse that will get you through the stresses and strains of modern life. I hope this booklet will help you begin to talk about the essential issues for your marriage.

Marriage preparation functions as an immunization that boosts your capacity to handle potential difficulties. Why not give yourself every advantage to succeed?

### **Ways I can help:**

I offer 90 minute sessions for you and your partner in my beautiful westside offices. I recommend that you purchase a four-session package to allow yourselves the time to explore all of these important issues with my guidance and support.

I also encourage you to participate in Start Right, Stay Connected, a one day



workshop for Engaged Couples. Offered throughout the year, this eight hour format is fun, dynamic and educational. You and your partner will be in a small group of other engaged couples to learn, share and grow your Relationship Toolbox.

A third option is for the two of you to spend a full one or two days with me in a Couple's Intensive. Designed just for you, this format is good for couples who want the learning of a workshop with the depth of a private session.



I have been a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist for over 25 years. I am Certified in Imago Relationship Therapy and am a Master Encounter-centered Couple's Therapist. I specialize in Premarital Therapy and am trained in the FOCCUS Premarital Inventory. I have helped thousands of couples like you prepare for a long and happy marriage.

### **Please contact me:**

Mary Kay Cocharo, LMFT  
www.mkcocharo.com  
therapy@mkcocharo.com  
310.828.2624