

4 Ways You Can Change the Dance in Your Marriage

A relationship is like a dance. You and your spouse have fallen into some ways of relating that seem normal. Whether you like them or not, you know the steps of this dance. But if this dance isn't working to bring you closer to each other and closer to God, it's time to change the dance in your marriage.

We learn dance steps early in a relationship, often even before saying "I do." He wants to go out, she wants to stay home; who "wins?" She's frustrated because he was late; who says what? He's upset because she got emotional over something he sees as minor; what happens next?

In marriage these dance steps become deeply ingrained and the stakes become exponentially greater. Money talks, sex talks, parenting challenges, long-term dreams and goals, ways of handling conflict, spiritual conversations or lack thereof—you do the dance steps. When she cries, he walks away. When he gets angry, she knows just how to shame him.

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Hopefully you've learned that by now. But if you change the dance steps, your spouse will be forced to change in some way too. You may or may not like how they respond; they may step on your toes, yell and scream, or stop dancing altogether. *But the dance will change.*

Learning new dance steps is not easy, and you'll feel very uncomfortable for a while. Here are some ways to change the dance in your marriage if things aren't working.

1. Communication

Almost no one comes into marriage knowing how to communicate

well. You'll need to learn new skills that take into account your and your spouse's personality and communication style.

If you tend to avoid difficult conversations, you may need to do your homework carefully and plan out your talk time in advance. If you tend to get angry and defensive, you may need to practice some responses that keep your heart open while listening carefully to your spouse. If you naturally spill out your thoughts and feelings while your spouse disengages, you will need to pay more attention to when your spouse can hear you and perhaps get some of your needs met elsewhere.

2. Intimacy

Who tends to initiate sex? Do one partner's needs always take precedence? Can you talk about sex? Are you both taking the clothes off your mind and heart as well as your body?

Changing the dance around intimacy may mean dealing with old sexually-related wounds that need healing, having the sex talk, learning to initiate, learning to seek your spouse's heart more than their body or studying God's view of sex and marriage. It may mean persistently setting boundaries until your spouse deals with pornography or other sexual dysfunction. It may mean being vulnerable yourself in ways you find scary.

3. Handling Conflict

It's not *if* conflict happens, but *when* it happens. Have you always given in to your spouse's demands/wishes? You'll need to learn to think for yourself, express your thoughts simply and clearly, and worry less about your spouse being upset. Do you become angry and demand your own way? You'll need to intentionally learn to see things from your spouse's point of view and practice being unselfish. Do you try to avoid conflict at all costs? You'll need to stretch yourself to stay engaged, to communicate clearly, and to value the long-term health of your relationship more than temporary superficial

peace.

Conflict happens in all marriages. Learning the skills to handle conflict well can bring you closer together.

4. Spiritual Growth

When one spouse is more spiritually engaged than the other, or perhaps is not a Christian, the marriage can feel very painful. Remember that your relationship with God is between you and Him, regardless of how your spouse responds. It may be that your own growth in becoming more and more like Jesus will make your spouse want to experience the same.

If you've been subtly (or not-so-subtly) trying to manipulate your spouse into doing more spiritual activities, stop! Parading your high-sounding prayers or leaving certain books in obvious places hoping your spouse will "get the hint" doesn't work. Invite them. Pray for them. Stretch yourself to pray together if they are willing. And keep becoming more like Jesus.

Things to Know

You won't do any of this perfectly. Learning new dance steps is awkward. You'll make mistakes and may even unintentionally wound your spouse in the process. When you mess up, apologize and ask for forgiveness.

If your spouse is truly behaving badly, changing the dance in your marriage may mean setting some difficult boundaries. Doing so *may* provide your spouse the motivation they need to change course.

Remember that changing the dance is not about either you or your spouse getting everything either of you wants; it's about developing a relationship that is mutual and as healthy as possible. You are almost certain to have to bend in ways you find uncomfortable. *This is about learning to love well.*

You may struggle in knowing how to change the dance in your marriage. Get some help. That may mean connecting with another couple a little further along the road who can mentor you. That may mean getting some professional help if needed. And it always means staying on your knees. Keep asking God, “Who do you need me to be to my spouse in this season?”

May your dance be beautiful, healing, energizing and one God can use to bless others.

Your Turn: *How has the dance been in your marriage? Are there any dance steps you are deciding to change? Leave a comment below.* {eoa}

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