

7 Honest Questions You Need to Ask About Your Marriage

Karen and I have been married 40 years, but the first three years of our marriage were miserable. We thought once we were married, things would be great and we would live happily ever after. Were we ever wrong! And our naïveté almost ended in divorce.

Thankfully, it didn't. And that's due in large part to our commitment then—and now—to marriage maintenance. Yes, that's right: I included now in that equation. Because whether you're on the brink of divorce or thriving in your partnership, marriage requires continual upkeep. Karen and I learned that the hard way, but hopefully you don't have to.

Have you checked under the hood of your marriage lately? Here's a seven-point checklist to keep your marriage well-oiled and running smoothly.

1) How is your relationship with God?

Your spouse can't meet your deepest needs, and you can't meet theirs. That may fly in the face of what our culture wants you to believe, but it's true. When God paired Adam and Eve in the garden, He walked with them in their midst. That's the picture of how marriage works—with God at the center. When Adam and Eve rebelled, their marriage suffered as they lost the garden God had created for them to share.

When Karen and I married, we were believers but didn't know how to rely on the Lord daily. Because of that, we tried to get our deepest needs met through each other, which only resulted in frustration and bitterness. We thought we'd made a mistake in marrying each other—but we didn't. Our mistake was in trying to squeeze God out of each other.

The most important thing Karen and I do for our marriage every day is to start each day with prayer, the Bible and seeking God. That's where we take our cares, needs, hurts and desires. In that daily prayer time, the Lord heals, fills and empowers us with His incredible love.

Because here's the truth: Our deepest needs are acceptance, identity, security and purpose. These driving needs motivate us daily whether we realize it or not—and only God can meet those four needs on the deepest level of our lives. When we lack a relationship with Him in which those needs get met, we automatically transfer that expectation to our spouse, thus setting up our marriage and our mate for failure.

The most important issue in your marriage is your personal, daily, dynamic relationship with God. If you're rusty in this area, you probably need to apologize to your spouse for putting too much pressure on them—and to the Lord for not keeping yourself in well-tuned, daily fellowship with Him. When you've been with God, you can love your spouse properly. You'll find your expectations right, your heart healthy and yourself ready to love out of the overflow of God's love that's already in you.

2) How are your marriage disciplines and traditions?

In marriage, it isn't what you can make happen but what you can keep happening. Many married couples become distracted after a period of time and stop caring for each other's needs. Then they begin to fight and a big blow-up hides just around the corner. If they work through it, they may go for a second honeymoon or romantic getaway. But once that phase is over, they go right back into the negative cycle of distraction, fighting, making up and so on. The longer this cycle recurs, the more dangerous it becomes and the harder it gets to make up and keep going.

Good marriages prioritize regular disciplines and traditions

that ensure the right things keep happening. For example, almost all good marriages include a date night or date day in the weekly or monthly routine. It isn't in response to a fight or a crisis. It is a proactive discipline in the relationship.

Early in our marriage, Karen and I walked together every morning for an hour and a half. We would pray for 45 minutes and talk for 45 minutes. It was one of the best things we ever did with each other.

Do you have a date night (or day)? Do you prioritize your marriage and protect the time and energy you have together? Don't wait for a convenient time. Make it happen, and keep it going.

3) Are you emotionally bilingual?

You're no doubt familiar with the old saying "Marriage is about becoming one." But maybe you haven't heard the cynical response: "Yes, but which one?"

In many marriages, a battle is forged to see which language gets spoken in the home—the man's or the woman's. But we are different by God's design, and we have different needs. Men need honor. Women need security. Men need sex. Women need nonsexual touch and affection. Men need to be friends with their wives. Women need open and honest communication. Men need their wives to be domestically centered. Women need their husbands to lead.

The essence of romance is speaking in your spouse's language as you meet their needs in love. Romance is not a language lesson; it's a language *demonstration*, where you enter your spouse's world and speak love the way they understand it. When a husband and wife both do this, they are in heaven. But many marriages never make it to that point.

For your marriage to succeed, you'll need to meet needs in your spouse that you don't have. And they'll need to do the

same for you. The greatest marriage is two servants in love who sacrifice for each other. The worst is two selfish people who demand to be served.

Again, we are different by God's design, and it is unchangeable. Because of this, one key to a great marriage is becoming emotionally bilingual. Don't speak love in your own language; speak it in your spouse's language. As you do, you'll see them light up and respond.

Are you emotionally bilingual? What's your spouse's language? How can you speak it today—and every day?

4) Do you make decisions together as equals?

Marriage is about sharing. Yet it's amazing how many couples don't share decisions. Either one spouse dominates the relationship or both people share the same house but live separate lives.

Karen and I make all our important decisions together, and this is crucial to the intimacy and goodwill of our relationship. We don't bully each other or make each other pay a price for being honest. When we make decisions, we first submit them to God and pray. Our marriage is not a battle of wills; it is a search for His will. Then, because we share all the big decisions, there's no chance for resentment or division to creep into our life together.

Do you and your spouse make decisions together? Do you respect your spouse's input? Are you willing to compromise, or is it your way or the highway? This is a big issue with a big payoff when you make the commitment to slow down, pray, talk and agree.

5) Who are your friends?

Paul doesn't pull any punches when he says, "Do not be deceived: 'Evil company corrupts good habits'" (1 Cor. 15:33).

Your friends are your future. You become like the company you keep. If you don't believe that, you're deceived.

Karen and I are committed to our local church and Christian friends. None of our friends are perfect, and we aren't perfect either, but we're all committed to living for Christ and to our marriages. In 40 years of friendship with dozens of couples, only one of those couples has divorced—and prior to that divorce, the husband left church and developed a close friendship with a ungodly man.

We live in an immoral, evil world. There's never been such a strong pull of sin on all our lives. In response, we must be honest about our vulnerabilities and need for each other. I doubt Karen and I would be together today if it weren't for the support and encouragement we received when we needed it most from our church and believing friends.

Realize that the “company we keep” includes entertainment, computers, Facebook and television. We must be careful and accountable about these things, as they have become prominent features in our culture and can be just as impactful on us as our friends.

Are you a committed member of a local church? Do you have friends who are committed believers and committed to their marriages? Are you accountable concerning your entertainment? The degree to which you take these things seriously is the degree to which your marriage has a chance to thrive.

6) Are you empathetic to your spouse?

Marriage research reveals one of the most important features in successful marriages is the ability to empathize with one's spouse. That simply means we are sensitive to them and “feel for them.” It means we care about how our actions affect them. It means caring for what they are going through and just caring for them in general.

When we date and fall in love, we are naturally empathetic to the other person. We work hard at trying to please them. We're sensitive and try to do things to make the other person feel good.

But then life happens. And in the process of paying the bills, of children, of sickness, of money stress and work stress, of in-laws and the IRS, we wake up one day to find issues crowded between us. If those issues aren't dealt with properly, we end up hardened toward the other person. The empathy we once felt becomes frustration. We focus no longer on our spouse's feelings but our own.

When Karen and I were on the verge of divorce, I had become very angry with her. I felt mistreated and that I'd made a mistake in marrying her. It was all about me. As issues accumulated between us, I began focusing on the negatives in her and feeling sorry for myself. The young man who was so tender-hearted toward Karen when we dated became a hard-hearted husband who couldn't care less about how my behavior affected her. I was convinced that if Karen would just change, everything would miraculously become fine.

Even as I believed that, Karen suffered from my dominance and verbal abuse. The change in our marriage only began when God broke through my hard heart and let me see myself as I really was. At that moment, I realized how domineering and damaging I had become. Standing at the brink of divorce, I finally began to empathize with Karen again. I put myself in her shoes and came to the stark realization of what it must have been like to be married to me.

Being empathetic is a choice, not an emotion. Regardless of the condition of your marriage, start thinking about how your spouse might be feeling. Forgive them, and ask the Lord to give you the grace to act above your emotions.

7) Is your marriage first?

Genesis 2:24 says, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and be joined to his wife." As I'm sure you already know, marriage requires leaving and cleaving. In other words, for marriage to work, it has to be first in your life. It won't work any other way.

Back when Karen and I were on the verge of that divorce, I was addicted to golf. I played almost every day. Karen complained about it because it kept me away from our family, and when I was home I was exhausted. Even though I told her she was first, it wasn't true. In real terms, golf came before her.

Part of the healing of our marriage came when I hung up my golf clubs for Karen. In doing so, I expressed to her in real terms she was first. The result was a resurrection in the garden of our love that had been destroyed through my distraction.

In real terms, your marriage must come before your children, your church, your friends, your smartphone, your family, your work and everything else going on in your life. This is the way God designed marriage, and it simply won't work another way.

Making your marriage first means saying no to other things. It means saving time and energy for your spouse every day and protecting your marriage from intruders. It means doing little things like turning off your phone when it's time to talk to them, ignoring incoming calls and texts, making eye contact when they speak, turning off the TV or computer to spend time together and putting down the newspaper so you can have a real conversation.

Does something else come before your spouse right now? Is your marriage really first? Keeping your marriage first—along with all these other checkpoints required for healthy maintenance—is crucial for keeping your marriage on the open road.

Jimmy Evans is founder and CEO of MarriageToday, a ministry devoted to helping couples thrive in strong and fulfilling marriages and families. He has served as senior leader of Trinity Fellowship in Amarillo, Texas, for more than 30 years and has authored more than 10 books, including his latest, *When Life Hurts*. Jimmy and his wife, Karen, have been married 40 years.

Jimmy Evans discusses five key standards for achieving successful communication in your marriage at