

If You Want a Healthy Marriage, Love's Not All You Need

If you're over a certain age, perhaps you can hear it in your head even now: "All you need is love. Love. Love is all you need."

But love is *not* all you need. At least if by "love" you mean that butterflies-and-rainbows, all-engrossing feeling in your stomach when you imagine being with a certain person. Or that "I'm OK, you're OK" all-inclusive tolerance some segments of society advocate. Erotic attraction or complete tolerance may be good in their proper place, but that kind of "love" is not enough to grow a successful marriage between two sinners.

On the other hand, if by love you mean the relentless, covenantal, action-taking, God-kind of love, then perhaps love is all you need. That kind of love hates what hurts the beloved. It's fierce, sacrificial, unselfish and enduring, for starters.

So if love is not all you need, what else is there? What do you need besides what we usually think of as love to make a healthy marriage? Here's a partial list.

1. Skills

You come to marriage with certain ways of dealing with conflict, communicating, handling feelings and doing intimacy. How have those habits worked out for you? Has the baggage you brought to marriage been helpful—or not?

The good news is that skills are learnable. Just as you learned skills necessary to do your job, you can learn skills necessary for a healthier marriage. You can learn to

communicate more effectively. You can learn to handle conflict in a way that leads to solutions. And you can learn to pursue intimacy, to set healthy boundaries and to forgive.

Skills take practice. Your marriage won't change overnight. About the time we got married, I said to my husband, "There are many of these dance steps I don't know how to do. But I'm willing to learn." Determining to learn relationship skills will pay off in many ways.

2. Mindset

What many people mean by "I love you" is actually, "I love how I feel when I'm with you." That feeling doesn't last. And it's not love. If you go into marriage expecting to live happily ever after, you'll be disappointed every time. No human being, not even an "ideal" spouse, can meet all your needs.

Your mindset makes a huge difference. At its root, marriage is not about sex, good feelings, procreation or security, as good as those things may be. Marriage is a reflection of the intimacy and love God has within Himself, and that He wants with us. And as such a reflection, marriage is about learning to love well.

I don't know of any better question to ask, any better prayer, than this: "God, who do You need me to be to my spouse in this season?"

Sometimes that means taking your hands off so God can do His work. Sometimes it means setting healthy boundaries. Sometimes it means changing your own attitudes and behavior. And sometimes it means suffering long.

And a second part to that prayer would be, "God, what is Your perspective on my marriage?" Seeing things from His perspective can change your mindset.

3. Outside Fuel

Your marriage does not exist in a vacuum. You will largely become—in your marriage—the average of the five couples or individuals you spend the most time with. You will almost without realizing it pick up ideas and attitudes about respect, communication, handling conflict, intimacy and spiritual connection from the couples around you.

Look at the marriages you know who are a little further down the road than you are. Do you like what you see? If your marriage looks like that in five or 10 years, would that be a good thing? If not, it's time to find some healthier role models, some healthier outside people to provide some people-fuel for your marriage.

But wherever you look for such outside fuel, do so intentionally. Find couples who are displaying the kind of marriage you would like to have and find out how they do it. There are no perfect marriages! But reading about, talking with or rubbing shoulders with those who have learned to love well will make a huge difference in your own relationship.

Your Turn: Have you fallen into the trap of believing love is all you need? Which of these other factors seems most critical to your own relationship right now? Leave a comment below.
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