

Communication Key to Long-Run 'Happening'

By DAVID GIBSON
(NC News Service)

Marriage is a happening that can last a long time. That's good.

It's also hard; maybe if it weren't expected to last beyond the honeymoon it would be easier to think we'd be good at it.

That long period of time provides ample opportunity for a married person to discover that his partner is really something else (er, someone else, that is.)

It takes hard work and a lot of practice to be good at living with anyone else, particularly a marriage partner who as it often turns out, does not quite fit the mold one had him cast in before the wedding.

"Constant effort. It's work. It's not Hollywood. It's honest to God work for people to maintain a good, healthy, stable marriage."

The speaker is Dr. Brady McKaig, 34, a psychiatrist in charge of couples-therapy at the Psychiatric Institute in Washington, D.C.

With a grin, Dr. McKaig had sandwiched me into a complicated twelve-hour work day that includes directorship of admissions for the hospital, short term "crisis intervention" therapy with hospital in-patients, group therapy sessions with out-patients, as much as 90 minutes a day with phone calls and extensive administrative paper work.

"So many of the difficulties in marriage have to do with people coming into marriage with a perception of the spouse that really is not the spouse," Dr. McKaig explained.

In other words engaged couples really don't know each other as well as they think they do. You hear this often enough. But I began to wonder if there could be some sort of preparation for marriage that would work, that would help prospective spouses form authentic images of each other.

"Certainly knowing — really getting to know the spouse before marriage — and having a very meaningful, effective and open channel of communication," is needed, Dr. McKaig said.

"I guess basically you have to start with knowing yourself and something about your own needs. What needs are you carrying into a marital relationship that you would like to have satisfied or gratified?"

"And then: What type of individual can best respond and fulfill those needs for you?"

By and large, Dr. McKaig said, it would be helpful if those who are not oriented to thinking about such questions could be able to learn in some structure way—to sit down on a regular basis for some kind of preparation.

"The trouble is 'when people begin contemplating, talking and considering marriage, they're almost beyond the point of having an objective view-

point about each other. It's so subjective at that point. Obviously, they're very emotionally involved with their partner."

"At this point, how much are they going to hear? How effectively can they begin to censor out and screen out things they may not want to think about, things that may well be true, that an objective person can see? Maybe somewhere earlier, maybe in the schools . . ." he mused.

"I mean, one thinks, 'Yes I am aware of certain things about my prospective spouse that I am concerned about or have some question about. How effectively am I going to be able to live with such and such a characteristic that he or she has.' But a lot of this is lip service."

At this point, I reminded myself that marriage itself provides ample opportunity for getting to know that a spouse is really something else.

Along with problems, some sizzling feelings, and some communication gaps, husbands and wives do have the opportunity of getting to know each other more objectively.

Regrettably, some couples do not find ways of dealing successfully with the problem this can cause them. That is often where McKaig can enter in. His job: restore realism.

"A lot of the success of marriage is involved in knowing where the other spouse is in his or her thinking and feelings—the feelings being even more

important than the thinking—and then working on the issue of expressing feelings in healthy ways, which is very difficult."

Usually in couples-therapy, Dr. McKaig explained, people discover that it takes more than one person to make a marriage problem. When this is realized and when the problem is worked at in light of this, treatment proceeds much more effectively.

If a husband and wife are trying to do the difficult work of maintaining a good healthy stable marriage, "they will need to keep their perceptions and assumptions about their spouse in agreement with the reality of the situation. They should not have unrealistic expectations of the spouse and then begin acting on those unrealistic expectations. Neither should they begin relating to the spouse as if the spouse were somebody else or had the characteristics of somebody else," he warned.

"Similarly, a healthy marriage demands that spouses not make unwarranted assumptions about what the other spouse is thinking and then act on those assumptions."

"So much of the difficulty in marriage can come down to a failure of effective communication, a breakdown of communication," Dr. McKaig said.

It occurred to me that you can find a communication gap almost anywhere you find a problem these days.

Maybe it seems strange to find communication gaps in such an intimate relationship as marriage. But maybe that's because it is so intimate.

There are so many possibilities for getting to know someone, subjectively and objectively, that some communication gaps are bound to open.

Learning to leap them—and prevent them—is what makes them—what makes marriage, like many shorter-lived happenings, an exciting process.

5 STEPS TO RUINING YOUR MARRIAGE

1. Insist on your own way. Never give in or compromise—even on little things.

2. Run home to mother with your troubles. Never try to solve things yourself — or together.

3. Air your spouse's faults in public. Amuse the crowd at a party with anecdotes about his or her failings. Never let a slip pass without comment.

4. Put other things before each other. If you're a husband, your job, hobby or do-it-yourself project. If you're a wife, the children, housework, cards or club work.

5. Always wait for your partner to say he or she is sorry first, if you have an argument. Never admit you are wrong.

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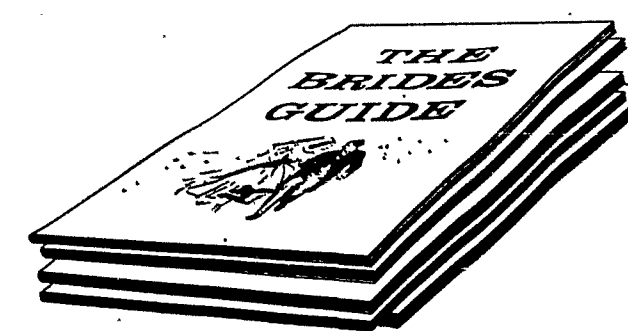
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