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KNOWING THE REAL ME

Marriage Matters

Focus on Newlyweds

By DAVID R. MACE, Ph.D.

A British study by Barbara Thornes and Jean Collard is under the title *Who Divorces*. They report that of all the divorced couples they interviewed, one third of them admitted that their marriages were in serious trouble by the time they reached their first wedding anniversary.

Obviously, this means that the first year of marriage can be critical. We need not be surprised at this. In that first year the couple inevitably develop their interaction patterns by trial and error. What they really do is bring to each other a pile of raw materials, dump them together, and then try to arrange them into a pattern representing a shared life. The raw materials represent the standards, values, tastes, preferences, expectations, and habits which each has developed as a result of previous experiences since early childhood.

In some areas they find they are in agreement. If both like pizza and enjoy listening to Beethoven, that will guarantee them some pleasant evenings. If both like to jog and play tennis, they will keep fit together. If they are both camping enthusiasts, they can look forward to some pleasant and inexpensive vacations.

On the other hand, if one is an early riser and the other a night owl, there will be complications. If one is sociable and the other prefers solitude, some difficult adjustments lie before them. If one is a spendthrift and the other a saver, money

management will be tough.

Make no mistake about it, that first year together will be a time for painful adjustments and sacrifices. If they try to make those early months an extended honeymoon, a lot of potential conflicts are going to pile up on the back burner.

Some years ago, Claude Guldner and his colleagues interviewed couples starting out in marriage. They found that the state of premarital bliss continued for some into the early months but six months after the wedding all of them were confronting the realities and running scared. Guldner suggested that might be the optimum time to offer them help. Indeed, some of the couples acknowledged that they were now ready to stretch out both hands for help that they would have rejected earlier.

Shouldn't we, then, be doing a whole lot more to guide newlyweds through that critical first year together?

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Marriage counseling services are a great boon for couples who need them and the competence of well-trained therapists is high today. But therapy often comes at a time when so much damage has been done that alienation is far advanced and the motivation to work at the relationship is depleted. It really doesn't make sense to stand aside and say, "When you get into such a mess that you are really hurting, call on us and we'll help you."

At the other end, we work hard to prepare young couples for marriage. This has been the task of the churches because most couples choose a religious wedding ceremony. Unfortunately, however, investigations suggest that the effectiveness of premarital education has been greatly overrated. It is only when the couple are really into marriage that they know what help they need.

I recall a couple with whom I did extensive marriage counseling.

At our closing interview, the husband said to me, "I am grateful for all you've done for us, but I find your policy puzzling. You go to a lot of trouble to provide us with information before we have the experience of marriage. Then you help us again after we've had the experience and made a mess of it. Why don't you help us while we're having the experience?"

Why don't we? Because we have surrounded marriage with taboos, with "Keep Out" signs. We certainly don't want to encourage intruders. But should qualified and well-intentioned helpers also be barred?

After the wedding, we put our young couples in a tightly guarded enclosure and leave them strictly alone. The intention is good - we want them to have complete privacy. But if they flounder about within that enclosure, helplessly trying to cope with tasks often far more difficult than they had anticipated, are we really acting sensibly? I have investigated this situation and I think that the privacy these newlyweds are subjected to is imposed upon them rather than being what they really want.

What is clear is that once they have established their interaction patterns during their first year together, the best opportunity for flexible and effective adaptation will be past. If qualified and sensible helpers can enable the couple to build a good foundation for their future life together when everything is fluid and malleable, we might significantly increase the number of successful marriages in our communities. If, however, we don't do that, we are failing to use the best opportunity we have to get new marriages off to a really good start.

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