

Newlyweds' 5 Biggest Pitfalls

By Leanna Skarnulis

WebMD Feature

Reviewed By [Michael Smith, MD](#)

Love and marriage may "go together like a horse and carriage," but most newlyweds set off without a shared road map. Each partner comes to the journey with their own set of directions including -- assumptions about roles, expectations about how to spend time and money, and deeply held beliefs about children. Then there's also -- baggage. Experts say it takes desire, honest communication, and hard work to move a relationship from the romantic stage through the power struggles to a loving marriage based on shared meaning. Get off to a good start by avoiding these five major pitfalls:

1. My family does it this way.
2. Marriage will make me happy.
3. My partner will change once we're married.
4. Talking about issues like his rowdy friends, her credit card debt, when to have kids, and who should clean the toilet, will take the bloom off romance.
5. We should avoid conflict at all costs.

My Family Does It This Way

His family sits down together around the dining room table for dinner every night. Her family scatters and grabs dinner on the run.

Couples often underestimate the influence of their families. "People go into marriage with expectations that are engrained almost subconsciously," says Addie Lebin, MS, LMHC, a private mental health counselor in Winter Park, Fla. "They think, I'll get married, and I'll do it like my family did it. But you can't build a house with two sets of blueprints. The whole object is to come up with your own set of plans. It's not your mom and dad's house."

Mark Freeman, PhD, agrees with Lebin that families operate on both conscious and subconscious levels. He counsels couples and teaches a class called "Marriage and the Family" in his roles as director of personal counseling and instructor at Rollins College, also in Winter Park. On a conscious level, he says, when there's interference from one of the spouse's family members or a person doesn't have total allegiance to his or her spouse that creates problems within a person's marriage.

On a subconscious level, families provide the frame-of-reference that individuals bring to the marriage regarding money, gender roles, and other important issues. "Know each other well enough to find out what the stated expectations are, and recognize sometimes there are unconscious expectations. For example, you could say 'I'm open and like to deal with things,' but in your own family when conflict arose, you shut down. So it's the stated vs. the unconscious. Sometimes we have the best intentions to be one way, but then a

coping strategy from our own family comes up and violates the thing we are. We're human, not perfect."

Marriage Will Make Me Happy

He's lonely and has no friends. She feels inferior to her prettier, smarter, and wealthier sister. Both believe marriage will make them happy.

"In the early stages of a relationship, everything is beautiful," says Leibin. "Couples have to understand that love is never enough, and marriage doesn't make you happy. Happiness is a do-it-yourself job."

According to a 15-year survey reported in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, an individual's level of happiness before marriage is the best predictor of happiness after marriage.

My Partner Will Change

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She assumes he'll stop having lunch with his ex-fiancée. He assumes she'll give up expensive spa weekends with her friends.

Marriage inevitably means compromise, but couples need to compromise without giving away too much of what they value. Freeman advises articulating a marital contract that addresses the expectations each has for the other. "The expectations can be high, but make sure they're realistic," he says.

One task he addresses with couples in pre-marital counseling involves helping them overcome romantic illusions and unrealistic expectations. "When the romance diminishes, the relationship moves to a power struggle, and for a while, each person tries to change the other. Even though people mouth the words that they don't want to change the partner, they still try. It's a developmental stage, and if couples resolve it in a healthy way, they move into stability and long-term commitment. Marriages that blow up early have a romantic view, and once that's dissipated they think the marriage is broken and can't be fixed."

Leibin tells WebMD that rather than compromise and share, some couples continue to lead separate lives after marriage. "They end up pulling apart. Couples should be friends and learn to work together. I believe in a Saturday night date ritual, and maybe she makes the plans one week and he the next. It's a time to share their lives and try to understand each other's worlds."

She says love starts a relationship, and communication makes it grow into a good working relationship in which partners respect one another's differences. She sees many

couples who don't make an effort to learn about each other. "One newly married couple divorced over crumbs in the sink. He'd go off on her if there were crumbs, and she couldn't stand it."

Talking About Hard Issues Will Take the Bloom off Romance

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She doesn't tell him that once they have children she wants him to quit working. He doesn't tell her his company might relocate him to Singapore.

Leibin tells WebMD that in recent years she's seen an increase in the number of couples in trouble as early as the eighth month of marriage. "Often they'll say, 'I wish I'd known such-and-such.' People present their best selves before marriage, and they overlook serious issues, like alcohol abuse, that can destroy a marriage."

Far from ruining romance, talking openly and honestly fosters acceptance and deeper understanding which is essential if partners are to feel safe with one another. "When you feel safe with someone you love, you won't find anybody prettier, richer, or more desirable," she says.

We Should Avoid Conflict at All Costs

He leaves and goes for a drive when she confronts him about viewing computer porn. She learns to stifle her feelings about computer porn and keep quiet.

Couples who claim "we never fight" are missing an opportunity to build their relationship. "It's how couples handle the conflict that matters," says Freeman. "Do you de-escalate situations? Can you repair the relationship? Do you validate your partner after a big fight? When people give up on each other, it's usually because they've stopped trying to resolve conflicts."

The research of John Gottman, PhD, has had a profound impact on the field of marriage counseling. Freeman says Gottman can tell with 95% accuracy which couples will stay together. "He puts them in a room and videotapes them discussing their relationships. Then he observes their verbal and nonverbal behaviors, and counts positive behaviors, such as nodding or placing a hand on a shoulder, and negative behaviors, such as whining or stern criticism. With successful couples, the ratio is five positive behaviors to one negative. What makes them successful is the ability to reduce the negative feelings."

"Even good marriages will have criticism and defensiveness, but there's danger when people stonewall or feel contempt. If you hold someone in contempt, you don't think the problem can be resolved. Contempt replaces hope."

Freeman says some important lessons emerging from the research are different for men and women. "Wives who stand toe-to-toe with their husbands and don't give in do well. But when wives raise their tolerance levels, the marriage is doomed, because the husband makes a power play. Husbands who can calm themselves down and lower their anger are more likely to have happy marriages."

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