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Harmony in Marriage: 3. Emotional Maturity
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Harmony in Marriage:

3. Emotional Maturity

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Age and Marital Success

How old should people be before they can marry? In Maine, state law says that a girl must be 18 and a boy 21 years old before either can get married without parental consent. Actually, many youth marry before these ages, some even in their early teens. Marriage statistics show that as many as 40 to 45 per cent of the brides in some Maine counties are still in their teens.

Generally the divorce rates among those who marry in their teens is $3\frac{1}{2}$ times that of those who marry in their twenties. One study by Monahan shows that the older the age at marriage, the lower the divorce rate. It is obvious that age at marriage is important to marital success, particularly for those who marry before they're 21, because immaturity is accentuated below this age. Most studies show that the minimum age at marriage for men should be 20 to 22, and for women 19 to 21 years. More immature couples need to wait longer.

Despite the hazards, the median age of marriage continues to decline throughout the country. In 1900, the median age for marriage of men in the United States was 26, for women it was 22. Today the figures are 22+ for men and 20 for women. College graduates are an exception to these figures. Girls who finish college on the average are 24 when they marry; male graduates typically are 26 years old. Divorce rates are consequently also lower among these college people.

Maturity usually comes automatically in the process of growing up. Younger-than-average marriages do not automatically fail, but these couples face extra hazards because they have not lived long enough to develop the maturity needed for successful marriage. Of course, older people are sometimes immature also, but the possibility of trouble is minimized by their additional years.

This chapter discusses what it means to be mature, since maturity is one of the principal requirements for marital success.

Mature Attitudes and Marriage

Mature people take a serious attitude toward getting married. They realize marriage is an important step, requiring effort and sacrifice, so are willing to work to make the marriage succeed.

Willingness to try and the desire to see the marriage succeed are important ingredients to the success formula. Most couples run up against problems, conflicts, and situations that strain the marital ties almost to the breaking point. Couples not sufficiently motivated to try to work out these difficulties are inclined to give up too easily and to seek separation or divorce as the easy way out. Many marriages that fail could have been saved if the couple was willing to try and would have sought outside help.

One couple came to their minister with this comment: "We are willing to give marriage a whirl. Of course, if it doesn't work out we can always get a divorce."

The minister refused to officiate at the wedding because, as he explained to them:

"You aren't even married yet and you are already talking about divorce. With this kind of an attitude your marriage can't possibly succeed since you won't really try to overcome problems when they arise. I can't marry you under these circumstances."

Sometimes couples have unrealistic and overly-romantic ideas about marriage. Such couples have been influenced by romantic stories and novels, or by the Hollywood version of romance when the man and woman fall madly in love after a very brief acquaintanceship, and then "live happily ever after." Idealized romance is no substitute for mature love and compatibility.

Most studies reveal a correlation between length of engagement and marital success. One study by Burgess and Cottrell of 526 couples showed that the highest happiness scores were made by those who had been engaged for two years or longer. Only 11 per cent of these couples showed poor marital adjustment; 66 per cent of them showed a good adjustment. However, for those who had been engaged for less than three months before marriage, 50 per cent showed poor adjustment. Only 25 per cent of this group showed good adjustment. It is obvious that couples who give themselves a chance to get to know one another better, have a much greater chance of making marriage work.

Couples who marry young, hurriedly and with overly-romantic views of marriage are soon disillusioned. When marriage doesn't meet their expectations they are soon discouraged and come to regret their decision. If they can weather the storms of the first few years of adjustment, the relationship can grow and deepen and their love will rest on a firmer foundation.

Emotional Maturity

Most marriage counselors feel that emotional maturity is the most important requirement for successful marriage. In fact, some counselors even go so far as to say that any two people who are emotionally mature can be happily married. This statement may be extreme, but it emphasizes the importance of emotional maturity.

A person who is mature in his feelings is emotionally secure. He is free from crippling anxiety, doubt, or fear about himself and others. Of course, all normal people have some fear or some anxious moments. But the insecure person's fears are exaggerated. Some symptoms of emotional insecurity are:

- Excessive jealousy
- Deep feelings of inferiority
- Exaggerated lack of self-confidence
- Worry over little things
- Feeling of being rejected, unwanted, unloved
- Exaggerated emotional dependency on others
- Deep-seated guilt, shame
- Highly critical, rigid, judgmental attitudes
- Inability to accept responsibility, blame for shortcomings, projection of blame on others
- Excessive rationalization, making excuses because of failure
- Overcompensates for insecurities by bragging, aggressiveness
- Tendency to escapism through daydreaming, sleep, illness, drugs or alcohol, or walking away from situation
- Tendency to regress to infantile manifestations of behavior: tantrums, moodiness, crying, etc.
- Excessive hostility, resentment, bitterness

Emotionally immature people fluctuate in moods from joy to deep depression. Unstable people have a very low frustration tolerance. They get upset easily over the slightest frustration, often showing a violent

temper, or reacting violently and childishly when "crossed" or denied a wish.

Obviously, emotionally insecure or unstable people are hard to live with. They have trouble giving and receiving love and trust, are sometimes suspicious, moody, jealous, fearful, anxious, and hostile to the point where they make life miserable for others.

The following examples illustrate the behavior of emotionally immature people.

Mr. L. is an extremely jealous husband who always suspects that his wife is having an affair with another man. Everytime Mr. L. sees a delivery boy come to the door, or Mrs. L. talking to another man, he flies into a rage, accusing his wife of being a flirt and of being unfaithful.

Mrs. S. worries a lot. She is afraid of many things: the dark, storms, strangers, the water, new situations. She is afraid of auto accidents, of the children getting hurt, of her husband losing his job, of the international situation, of going anywhere, and that others don't like her.

Mr. X. was brought up in a family where the father was constantly away and the mother worked. He felt lonesome and rejected. Now that he is married he demands the constant attention and reassurance of his wife. He calls her up three or four times daily from the office. He wants to have lunch with her always, and for his wife never to go any place without him. She wanted to work, but she had to quit because he resented her being away from home and him. Mr. X. complains when his wife doesn't want to be with him every minute. He feels: "If she really loved me as I love her, she couldn't stand to be away from me for a minute."

Mrs. A. is indecisive. She postponed the wedding three times before she went through with it. She can't decide on the simplest things: furniture, a car, what to eat in a restaurant, whether to join a church, what is best for the children. She is so afraid of making the wrong decision that she ends up not making any.

Mr. C. is ill-tempered. When he doesn't get his own way he gets violently upset and starts throwing things. He is very nervous, high strung, grouchy, and unpredictable. His wife is afraid of him and complains: "I never know what he is going to do next."

As can be seen from the above examples, marriage requires a great deal of emotional maturity if people are to cope with the problems, conflicts, and frustrations of married life. Although every person is immature to a certain extent, serious marital problems are created when the immaturity becomes such a problem that the relationship between husband and wife is undermined.

If both husband and wife are alike in temperament, the situation is usually better, since those with similar emotional make-up are more compatible than are those of opposite natures. However, seriously neurotic people have difficulty adjusting to each other and working out their problems. If both are of superior intelligence, this may enable them to overcome some of the handicaps of being neurotic.

Social Maturity

Marriage requires social as well as emotional maturity. A socially mature person can be characterized in various ways.

He has made a number of friends of those of both sexes. In the normal process of growing up, every person passes through three stages:

Autosexual—the preschool stage of social development where the child is still a "loner," whose primary concern and interest is in himself.

Homosexual—the grade school stage of social development where the child has learned to make friends with others but prefers those of the same sex.

Heterosexual—the adolescent and adult stage of social development where the person has made friends of both sexes and has formed romantic attachments to those of the opposite sex.

Studies show that marital success can partially be predicted by the number of friends a person has (of both sexes) before marriage. Those who become friends with many different persons of both sexes have a greater chance of marital happiness since they have learned how to get along with others.

Some young people have trouble getting acquainted with the opposite sex, or they rush headlong into marriage with the first person they get to know personally. As a result, they may find they have made an unwise choice. Others go steady with one or two people while still quite young and so miss out on many opportunities to make other friends, play the field, and to discover desirable qualities to look for in a mate.

The socially mature person is one who has learned to cooperate with others in making decisions and working out mutual problems.

Evelyn M. Duvall traces five stages in social development of every growing person.

1. **Receiving**—"the gimmie stage" where all the person thinks about is "what I want, what I feel, what I need." The self-centered stage of social adjustment of infant children (and some adults).

2. **Manipulation**—using various means to get others to do what one wants. Crying, threatening, teasing, coaxing, and bribing are common methods of getting one's own way. Still a childish, immature approach to problems.

3. **Compromise**—used by persons who learn they can't always have their own way so are willing to give if they can take. "You do this for me and I'll do that for you." This method of getting along with others recognizes that the other person has feelings and needs too, and that a bargain may be better than getting one's own way completely without giving in return.

4. **Sharing**—two people join forces, share activities, work, responsibilities, for the sake of them both. Thus, a wife goes to work part-time to help the husband support the family; he helps at home with the housework. Or, together they work to buy a new car.

5. **Creative Cooperation**—the family begins to look beyond itself and its own selfish needs to the needs of others. Thus, a husband-wife work together to help build a community meeting hall.

Developing social maturity really means that a person moves from self-centered selfishness to other-centered concern and service. When husband and wife learn to be their brother's keeper, both in and outside the family, they have reached a high degree of social maturity and responsibility.

Socially mature people have enjoyed normal opportunities to date, court, work, and play with others. Every person, man or woman, should enjoy normal dating and courtship experiences before getting married. Couples who marry too young later feel they have missed out on the fun of their youth. Those who try "to sow their wild oats" after marriage create problems. The following statement is typical of the reactions of many people who marry too young.

"I have missed several years of important living, the dating period, living with another girl, being away from home, working maybe. I wouldn't get married so young again."

Many women later regret giving up the chances for a good job or an already established career to marry. Most educated women prefer working for a few years before marriage, or having a chance to work after marriage. A girl who unthinkingly leaves an excellent job to follow her husband to another part of the country may grow to resent it, especially if she can't get a comparable job, and family income is low. Of course, the place of any married woman is with her husband, but if she is going to regret giving up a job to get married, she had better think before she leaps. Most women—after a few years of work—are happy to leave a job for marriage. But all people should be ready to settle down when they actually do.

Socially mature people can enjoy a variety of activities, interests, and social experiences together. Ideally, husbands and wives should be able to share a variety of social activities. If they are individually interested in a wide variety of things, adjustment and sharing is easier because they probably will find something they both enjoy. Husbands or wives who have very narrow interests, or who are each absorbed by particular hobbies in which the other is not interested, find that real companionship is more difficult to establish. Each should at least be willing to learn about the interests of the other so both can enjoy them together.

Intellectual Maturity

Marriage involves a sharing of ideas and thoughts, and a working out of differences in ideas or philosophies. What two people think and talk about is important. Many husbands and wives enjoy intellectual companionship through ordinary conversation and discussion as much as they enjoy sex together, eating together, or going out together. Fortunate are those couples who can talk to one another and who have interesting things to say.

Studies show that intellectual companionship is easier if the husband and wife have a similar education. Ideally, the college graduate should marry a college graduate with whom he can share ideas, vocational and outside interests. Many husbands feel inferior to and come to resent their wives if they are better educated than they are. Similarly, many wives who work to put their husbands through college, and who don't go themselves, find they no longer can share the same interests as their husbands. Their husbands "have grown away from them". The wives feel inferior among the husband's friends who are college people. This is not to say that two people with different educational backgrounds can't be happy together, but it does mean that a similar educational background helps to give them much in common.

Intellectual maturity is more than having a formal education. Mutual curiosity, willingness to learn, and open-minded tolerance enable a person to listen to ideas and philosophies different from his own. Intellectual maturity depends partially upon emotional maturity. Mature people recognize that they don't

have to think alike or agree on everything to have a good relationship. Most modern women hate to be considered dumb or intellectually inferior. Most modern men want to be admired for their ideas and intelligence. Neither wants to be belittled or rejected. Only people who are mature can accept differences of opinion and still feel that such differences are no threat to their egos or to their love.

Spiritual Maturity

Spiritual maturity is also important to marital happiness, since faith, morals, and values enter into every human relationship. Marriage requires the ability to trust, and it requires the practice of basic ethical principles. Without faith and morality successful family living is impossible. Perhaps this is why persons who regularly attend church, or those who have received regular religious training through high school, are more successful in marriage than those who have not. More will be said about religion and marriage in Chapter VI.

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