

Lakewood Counseling and Career Center

6607 18th Avenue South • Suite 101 • Richfield, MN 55423 • 612-798-7373 • Fax 612-243-3615

LIFE CYCLES OF A MARRIAGE

By Kris Koestner and Paul Lehrer

While we may stay married to the same person until “death do us part”, the truth is that during that time we will have several different marriages with different developmental tasks at each stage. Following is a brief overview of 7 different life cycle stages of marriage, followed by questions designed to help you reflect on your experience.

Stage 1: The Movie Marriage in Your Mind - Developmental Tasks

1. Decide husband/wife roles.
2. Commit to enjoying your differences.
3. Establish adult relationships with families of origin.
4. Finish the fight over finances.
5. Divide/assign household chores.
6. Lessen power struggles.
7. Learn to expect the unexpected.
8. Begin coming to terms with unfinished business in your past.

Exploratory Questions:

1. Do you insist on a “happily ever after” view of marriage?
2. Does your partner have to do things the way your parents did?
3. Do you see differences in viewpoint as signs of rejection or loss of love?
4. Do you continue to feel more attached to your family of origin than to your spouse?
5. Do you recognize the difference between courtship love and married love?
6. Do you escalate fights into power struggles or win/lose situations?
7. Do you avoid looking at or working on your unfinished business from childhood?

Stage 2: Our Careers are Everything Marriage - Developmental Tasks

1. Resolving career and economic dilemmas in ways that move you closer together.
2. Redefining personal identity.
3. Making gender equality a reality in your marriage.
4. Trying to see and understand the fear behind marital anger.

Exploratory Questions:

1. Are you so over-focused on work, you lose sight of your life partner?
2. Do you support and encourage your partner's chosen career path?
3. Are you able to see yourself (and your partner) as more than a paycheck?
4. Do you share household chores equitably?
5. Do you expect your partner to take care of you the way mom and dad did?
6. Do you react in anger and counterattack, instead of looking for solutions?

Stage 3: And-Baby-Makes-Three Marriage – Developmental Tasks

1. Differentiate child from spouse and see spouse as an individual and as part of a threesome.
2. Incorporate self-image as including new role as mother/father.
3. Create new balance in your life.
4. Develop an intentional parenting style both individually and with your spouse.
5. Create a we-ness of parenting.

Exploratory Questions:

1. Do you feel jealous of the relationship your spouse has with your son/daughter?
2. Have we found adequate support for ourselves as parents/couple?

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3. Is there an on-going power struggle over work or division of responsibilities?
4. Do I/we have a care plan for self/marriage?
5. Are we working to improve our parenting skills?
6. Have we as a couple discussed our parenting philosophy?
7. Do we let our children pull us apart?

Stage 4: The-Light-at-The-End-of-the-Tunnel Marriage – Developmental Tasks

1. Parenting differently as your children grow.
2. Creating a family identity.
3. Staying connected with spouse, i.e. resisting the cultural pressure to make your marriage all about the children.

Exploratory Questions:

1. Are you able to enjoy this breather time?
2. Are you using this time to reconnect with your spouse?
3. Are you allowing your children to be more independent?
4. Are we developing family traditions?

Stage 5: The Is-This-All-There-Is Marriage/Adolescence/Middlesence – Developmental Tasks

1. Coming to terms with your own (and spouses) aging?
2. Readjusting relationships with children as they near adulthood.
3. Becoming authoritative parents able to set limits.
4. Coming to terms with unfinished business from your family background that may be triggered by re-experiencing your own adolescence as your children are in their teen years.
5. Developing courage to face life's tragedies.
6. Affirming each other's life competencies.
7. Living in the present.

Exploratory Questions:

1. Are you or your partner hanging on to your children and not letting them go/grow?
2. Are we finding the time we need for each other?
3. Am I (are we) defining who I am, where do I belong?
4. Are we talking/sharing our fears and concerns about aging?
5. Are we able to face and triumph over life's tragedies?
6. Are we supporting each other as we move through this transition time?
7. Are you tackling any unfinished business from your own childhood/adolescence?

Stage 7: The Companionship Years Marriage – Developmental Tasks

1. Mine the gold in your past experiences.
2. Improve your relationship with grown children.
3. Deepen relationship with your own parents and/or grieve their deaths.
4. Make transition from parenting to grand parenting.
5. Widen your range of life experiences rather than narrow them.
6. Explore, discuss and negotiate decisions about retirement.

Exploratory Questions:

1. Do you continue to view your children who are now adults, as the children they once were?
2. Do you still see your parents as the all-powerful presence of your childhood?

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3. Are you coping adequately with the inevitable role reversal with your parents that the aging process creates? Are you moving through the necessary grief involved in the death of a parent?
4. Do you see aging only in negative disease type terms or in more positive life cycle terms?
5. Do you believe that the best part of life is over and it's all downhill from here?
6. Can you graciously adjust to a changing body image or are you clinging to lost youth?
7. Are we satisfactorily handling the transition from work to retirement?

Stage 8: The Goodbye Years Marriage – Developmental Tasks

1. Overcome the culture's negative view of aging at the same time that you face the inevitable end of your life together as a couple.
2. Continue to grow individually and as a couple.
3. Affirm the meaningfulness and richness of your past and present life together.

Exploratory Questions:

1. Do you see loss/grief as opportunities for personal and relational growth?
2. Do you know how to ask for help and where to ask for help?
3. Do we have a will so our estate is in order?
4. Do you have the spiritual tools to deal with the big issues and questions you will face during this time of life?
5. How do you prepare today for what you know will come tomorrow, whenever that tomorrow may be?

Many couples find marital therapy to be a help in dealing with life cycle transitions in their marriages. Research shows that the following are key characteristics of resilient, long lasting marriages:

- Shared Vision
- Respect for Differences
- Capacity to Repair Relational Breaks
- Reciprocal Nurturance
- Balance of Power, Privilege and Responsibility
- Clear Boundaries
- Mutual Trust