

Developing a Shared View of Marriage

One of the most difficult challenges early in a marriage is the process of taking the differing marital expectations of two spouses and blending them to create a shared image with which both can be happy. If this process of adaptation is successful, the groundwork is laid for a satisfying marital relationship. If there is little accommodation, the spouses will be caught up in a cycle of arguing or of distancing from one another. Fights over how much contact to have with one's family, whether or not to buy things on credit or when to have children are but a few of the possible areas of disagreement.

One couple's story can illustrate this problem. Margie and Mitch met in college. He was a senior and she was a sophomore when they were first introduced by a friend. There was an immediate attraction between them. They dated only a few months before deciding to marry.

For the first six months of their marriage, they lived in a blissful honeymoon phase. Mitch had graduated and gotten a job as a banker. Margie continued to take her classes and "keep house." They often cuddled on the couch or went for a walk together in the evenings.

As they entered their seventh month, Margie was beginning to notice that things had been changing. It seemed to her that Mitch had been withdrawing from her. They were spending less and less time together. He was working later at the bank and his weekends were increasingly filled with golf games and meetings to increase his professional contacts. She realized that the soul-searching talks they had while they were dating had long since ended. She was feeling isolated and lonely.

When she attempted to express her concerns to Mitch, he listened, but had a different view. He insisted that his changing schedule was essential to any success he might have in his career. They came away from their talks afraid that things wouldn't change, yet dedicated to doing what they could to stay connected.

What they had not yet discussed was the difference in their family backgrounds and how these differences were influencing their expectations of their own marriage. Margie grew up in a family where dad was an alcoholic and mom took care of the needs of the family. Her dad had been gone most of the time and when he was at home, things were tense. Her family life had been very painful for her and she vowed that she would marry a man who didn't drink and who offered more stability than her father. She wanted someone she could be close to and whom she could count on to be home.

Mitch came from a family with strong religious ties. They went to church regularly and looked good, stable and healthy. What was less apparent was the distance that existed between the members of the family. There was very little connectedness between them. His father worked long hours and was often gone in the evening or on weekends. Mitch was not even aware of it, but he wanted a marriage where he could be close and at the same time be allowed to pursue his career and have plenty of space to himself.

Margie's expectation of closeness and Mitch's desire for distance set up a pattern of pursuit and withdrawal. It was only when they discussed their needs that changes occurred which increased their satisfaction. With their expectations out in the open, they were able to negotiate time together and time apart so that both of them were more satisfied. They set aside couple time. Margie did more things by herself and Mitch came home earlier on some days. Margie took up golf so that the weekend golf games were sometimes a shared couple activity. While they were able to resolve most of the tension, perhaps the most useful benefit was simply being able to talk about their needs without the defensiveness they had experienced before.

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