



The first five years can be exhilarating as couples experience new “firsts” together – their first Christmas as a married couple, first dinner party for the in-laws, even their first joint tax return. At the same time, the early years require some radical personal adjustment, which is stressful on the relationship.

Most divorces occur during the first five years of marriage (Kreider, 2005), with the highest incidence of divorce coming in year three (Kurdek, 1999). Why?

Sometimes it's poor choice of spouse. Couples who entered enthusiastically – but blindly – into marriage soon see their spouse's shadow side when there's no longer a need to keep up a good front. They realize that they married a person who doesn't share the remote, likes to chatter in the morning or, much worse, doesn't share their values. They assume that marriage won't change that and they divorce quickly.

Others fall prey to the stresses of early marriage. Some of these stresses might be age-related. Young couples may not have developed the emotional maturity, coping and communication skills, or financial savvy to navigate the many decisions thrust upon them early in their marriage. Hanging in there and learning the art of negotiating can resolve many of these issues, but it takes maturity and patience.

Help is available if the couple has the wisdom and humility to seek it. The most important thing to remember is that most of the early stressful adjustments in marriage are normal. Beyond leaving the cap off the toothpaste or the toilet seat up or down, what are the important issues that need to be negotiated?

According to research done by the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University (2000), the top three issues for couples during the first five years of marriage are time, sex, and money:

A. Time

You would think that combining households would simplify life and save time. But newly married couples have to keep up with their spouse's schedule in addition to their own. Add in jobs, education, time for new in-laws and private time together,

and it may seem like you're a hamster running around the wheel of life. Then, when the first child arrives, you realize that life will never be the same. Most newlyweds struggle to balance family and work. Since work pays the bills, it's tempting to consider it the top priority. An all-consuming job, however, like a mistress, can steal attention from your spouse. You may need to agree on how many extra hours you can reasonably work. Carving out quality time for the two of you can require sacrifice, such as cutting back on personal hobbies or workouts at the gym. At some point you may need to summon the courage to look for a different job ... or work out together.

B. Sex

Sex should be the easy and fun part. After all, you're married! Why would this cause stress? Despite the conventional wisdom that your sexual relationship should be comfortable and exciting, especially during the early years of marriage, many couples reported problems around the frequency and quality of sexual relations. Developing a gratifying sexual relationship depends on having the time and energy to tend to it. Reread "Time" above. See also Sex and Intimacy for more on this.

C. Money

Most newlyweds are at the beginning of their earning curve. They are also learning to understand and blend their individual attitudes toward money. All of this can be stressful. In addition, many couples bring debt into the marriage, and some couples accumulate too much debt.

Another issue is: "Who has the power?" Many couples consider themselves egalitarian - "We'll share everything." Then she finds herself uncomfortable with the loose way he spends "their" hard earned money and he's annoyed by the way she hoards it. See Finances for more on this.

Other issues include parenting, religious differences, and conflict resolution.

Sometimes, the very issues that should bring a couple together, such as a child, faith, and communication, also cause strain. Because couples care so strongly about these things, they are both potential dividers and bonders.

The arrival of a child brings joy - and stress. Parents can feel overwhelmed with the responsibility of caring for a child, in addition to the loss of privacy and freedom. Parenting is hard work and when spouses are tired, they get irritable, just like kids.

Shared faith can bind the spouses together. It also requires that a couple talk about their different approaches to spirituality and God. Some people would rather ignore this part of life out of fear, guilt, or bad experiences. Good communication skills, compromise, unselfishness, and an open mind can help you work through the above issues.

So what can you do when you experience these normal stresses of life in the newlywed lane?

- Gather with other newlyweds. You'll find you're not alone.
- Keep dating. Prioritize quality time together.
- Confide in other couples who have recently walked this road. They can help you sort out what's normal and what is not. They can console you because they've been there and comfort you with stories of how it could be worse. Many Catholic parishes offer trained mentor couples for their engaged and newly married couples