



My husband and I have been married 35 years and have led marriage preparation programs for 30 of those years. We estimate that over that time we've prepared over 5,000 couples for marriage. I'm not sure if that makes us experts or outdated and, therefore, irrelevant. I can tell you the obvious - that times have changed and we have changed.

Early in my career, when I taught high school or college students about marriage, I'd say that communication was the key in choosing a mate and keeping a marriage healthy. I've changed my mind.

Yes, good communication is essential to a thriving marriage, BUT, it is not sufficient and probably not the most important criteria for choosing a mate. I say this because in my counseling I repeatedly came across couples who had learned the right communication skills and could use them. They knew how to use "I statements," listen to the whole person, and use active listening. They were often fine, caring men and women, but they had serious difficulty living together happily - not at the beginning, but after several years.

The bottom line often came down to either very different personalities or very different values. The other significant variable was the inability of at least one partner to make a lasting commitment.

Personalities cannot easily be changed, so it's a red flag when dating couples have very different personalities. Complementary personalities, however, can also be an advantage. For example, she's a talker, he's a listener; or he's a detail person, she sees the big picture. Often people with different personalities can work out accommodations as long as the difference is not too extreme or on too many different fronts. I tell my students that it's fine to differ on one or two elements of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, but if you differ on three or four and the differences are great, you'll probably have a lot of stress in your marriage.

Common values, however, can be a deal breaker. If one spouse values a simple lifestyle and the other values accumulating wealth, it doesn't matter how well they communicate, their basic life orientation will present constant opportunities for conflict. If one spouse values faith and the other resents religion, conflict is

inevitable. This doesn't mean that both spouses have to have the same religion, but both must value a spiritual dimension of life.

Another important common value is one's attitude towards having children. One partner may really want children and feels marriage would not be complete without a child, while the other is ambivalent or, worse, thinks children would impinge upon their lifestyle. Good communication can only clarify this difference, not solve it.

Likewise, if one spouse believes that career is the top priority and the other puts family first, the argument will be eternal- either by outward criticism and fighting or by going underground with general dissatisfaction or depression. Whether one spouse should stay home with young children is a subcategory of this issue.

Different beliefs about respect for human life and other moral values are deeply rooted. Getting new information and talking through differences usually only lead spouses to realize that they have vastly different life goals and values. These will not change without violating one's integrity and conscience.

Yes, communication is vital, and if couples don't have good communication skills, learning them can be a marriage saver. But if the values are significantly different, it's unlikely that even the best communication will be enough.

Is it too late?

This is fine, you may say, for engaged couples who have not yet made a marriage commitment, but what about us married couples? Is it too late? Can value differences be fixed or changed? The answer is that prevention is always preferable but seldom is a situation hopeless. A lot depends on the severity of differences and whether there are compromises that both spouses can tolerate.

I would never want a spouse to violate his/her conscience in order to please a mate, but sometimes one spouse may be too scrupulous. Over time they may learn that not everything is black and white. On the other hand, a spouse who rationalizes away ethical decisions, saying they are unimportant, may, with commitment and effort, develop a more sensitive conscience. It's not easy, though, since these are life long behavioral patterns.

Sometimes a couple can agree to disagree on a few values and live their lives in different spheres. For example, one night a week she goes to a prayer group and he plays his favorite sport. He supports her and does not interfere with her Sunday worship, even though he doesn't find it important for himself. Most serious value differences require counseling. That's the bottom line.