

Are You in a 21st Century Marriage?



Have you noticed that marriage is going through a design change? In large part, this is happening because there are no longer any firm rules for marriage. In the past, we adopted many of our marital roles and responsibilities through non-verbal agreement. Each partner's role was largely pre-determined, without much thought or discussion. The rules were very clear... and the traditional "man as leader, woman as follower" gender roles were well defined, although men and women did occasionally switch roles.



Keep in mind, however, that this model worked because we weren't challenging the roles. There was safety and security in having rules to follow, regardless of their basis. Marriages rooted in this model functioned well because of predictability and lack of ambiguity. Neither partner challenged the belief that this was "the way it should be." Inherent in predictability, however, is the risk that the relationship may become stale and feel unfulfilling.



Despite the rather dismal images described above, hope is not lost. Marriages can survive and even flourish in an environment of change. The 21st century marriage allows for taking more risks, bringing hidden expectations to the surface and challenging the unwritten assumptions or behaviors that were part of the original agreement. Couples are seeking ways to negotiate an arrangement that works best for their particular situation, rather than adjusting their situations to conform to possibly outdated design.



This 21st century "partners as equals" design requires that couples understand power and decision-making in some distinct ways:



Areas of Full Autonomy:

These are the territories within a marriage in which each individual retains their freedom to decide things for themselves, without requiring agreement from their partner. Examples are: decisions about choice of clothing one purchases or wears; decisions or choices around how each individual cares for themselves physically (i.e. fitness, diet, nutrition, exercise). This does not mean your partner will approve or agree with your choices... it just means that these areas are ultimately each individual's decisions to manage for themselves.

Areas of Limited Autonomy:

The "gray areas" of a marriage, where the individual's decision is heavily influenced by their partner's thoughts and feelings. Whether or not a person's choice or behavior is upsetting to the other may become grounds for lengthy discussions. Limited autonomy areas could include certain career path decisions or how money received as an inheritance might be handled. The partner has a high agreement and therefore depend heavily on cooperation, negotiation and compromise. These common decision areas may include financial security and parenting of children. Since the decisions are of crucial importance to both partners, each must be competent in the skills of empathic listening and creative problem-solving.

Couples that remain sensitive to areas for negotiation are taking the first step. Next, begin having "courageous conversations" that

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spell out each partner's ideas, preferences, and expectations. Being open to learning about our partner is the more difficult, yet more rewarding feature of a newer marriage's design. Maybe it is time for your marriage to get a "new look" or a "tune up." More resources are available for couples today than ever before. Take time to visit smartmarriages.com or www.amazon.com for the latest books tending to the needs of your own marriage. Ignorance is no longer bliss if you are in your marriage for the "long haul."

Dan Haycraft, M.D. and Meg Haycraft, L.C.S.W. of Wilmette are founders of TWogether, Inc. a premier education and counseling resource for couples. To contact them, call 847-581-9444 or visit www.twogether.org.

