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# The Concept of Marriage

**T**he concept of marriage is universal in most societies. A family consists of a husband, wife and their children. It is the basic unit of society and society exists because of families. The families together form the community in a locality. Communities in turn form the Nation. The family is eventually the basic unit of a civilization.

Adulthood is heralded in females by menarche and in males by the appearance of secondary sexual characteristics. It brings with it a sense of sexual awakening in all species. In most societies this is an indication to start preparing the ground for making the youngster accomplished in the many tasks ahead expected of an adult in life. Girls are taught cooking, household chores, sewing, and fine arts like singing and dancing. Boys are taught to fix gadgets, change bulbs and learn field work in rural areas. Later with maturity when the legal age is reached, the parents try to find a suitable match for the person to start his or her own family. A happy, lasting and vibrant partnership can become a reality if there is a conscious effort by the parents/society/guidance center to prepare the bride and groom for the new roles expected of them to make a success of this union of marriage.

Is marriage really necessary? What is its purpose? To a student of Biology, the primary objective of life is cohabitation and procreation. This is in all living species. Human beings are considered to be an evolved species which during its long civilizational history has put into place a series of social norms, religious denominations, legal procedures and a code of acceptable behavior patterns. These may vary in different communities and parts of the world but by and large the aim in a marriage is a conjugal peaceful coexistence which paves the way for a deep and lasting companionship.

A marriage formalized according to social norms provides acceptance in one's community. It is also important for inheritance purposes and legal matters. However, the greater purpose of this union is the fact that one seeks a companion to share one's life with on a day-to-day basis. It provides an opportunity for developing trust, coexistence, patience, a caring attitude and the indefinable joy of creating a new life and nurturing it together.

## FINDING A SUITABLE PARTNER FOR THE PURPOSE OF MARRIAGE

In some societies, the partners meet and choose each other independently of parents, friends or other family members. They may meet at some event or due to proximity of work. The decision to marry is generally one's own choice and family members including parents may be informed only after the two have decided to marry. This is largely the case in most of the western society. However, even today, in India, the parents, and family and, even the immediate community often play a role in suggesting and actively identifying a suitable partner for the marriageable person. Sometimes even the temple priest pitches in with suggestions. Before confirming a match, many parents in India would like to match horoscopes and study the suitability of the match by discussing the individual economic and social status and standing in the community of the two families as it is believed that disparities in these fields could create adjustment problems in one or the other of the partners. The educational qualifications and job description of the young man is crucial in the decision-making process. If the young lady is also working at a job then her earnings and rights are taken into account. A non-earning woman is not given the same consideration as far as the rights and certain responsibilities are concerned. However, all these issues are subject to discussion and

consent in most reasonable families. Sometimes, a man and woman may meet independently of anyone's intervention either at some social event or even in the work place and decide to marry. Even in such cases, the blessings of both sets of parents are sought and the wedding itself, mostly involves arrangements in which the entire family on both sides enthusiastically participates and celebrates.

## **THE NEED FOR PREMARITAL COUNSELLING**

Unfortunately premarital counselling in a structured manner is sadly missing in most cases. A young lady from a religious family told me that in Catholic families, the couple is required to attend a certain number of counselling sessions arranged by the Church before entering into a marriage. The objective is to familiarize the couple of the understanding and commitment required in a marriage and situations which may need one or the other to compromise or make adjustments to ensure the marriage remains strong even in the times of adversity. This is considered important as conventionally, the Catholic Church discourages break-up, separation or divorce in a marriage. Perhaps we need to consider this aspect of a relationship and ensure that the couple to be, are made more aware of the challenges and responsibilities of the sacred union they are about to enter into, by ensuring that we have in place a module to create awareness of the issue. Orientation programs are held for jobs and performance related work. Marriages too should have an orientation program to improve compatibility and promote understanding between partners, parents, siblings and extended families of each side. This would certainly help them navigate better throughout life within the intricate family dynamics. In our culture the institution of marriage is considered sacred and lifelong. It is indeed a pity that exposure to western culture has made some of our youth adopt live-in relationships and defiantly declare that marriage is just a piece of paper. A marriage is a live-in relationship with legal sanction which enjoys the approval of the society and community that we live in. One can be open about one's relationship and avoid deceit. I say this because I have known many who opted for a live-in relationship and would pretend they were married in order to be fully accepted by the community where they resided. Any relationship which offers scope for misrepresentation or deceit requires reassessment. In case such a couple opt for children, it would do well for them to understand the turmoil of a growing child who does not fully comprehend why he is different from his friends who may be asking him questions which he is unable to answer, about the relationship between his parents.

A transparent relationship requires both partners to be in communication at all times and to share their hopes and frustrations with each other. They also need to be open about their relationship and obligations, especially financial

if any, with their parents and siblings. Many a marriage develops cracks when one or the other partner financially supports a member of the parental family without taking the partner into confidence. This undermines mutual trust and creates a distance between the couple which is avoidable by a frank prior discussion.

Mutual trust and respect with open communication channels are essential for the smooth functioning of a household and understanding among the members of the family. Most societies are patriarchal in their established practices of marriage and running a household. Traditions and social behavior have evolved over the years. Many women today are well educated and financially independent. This fact has altered the way they see themselves and their roles in the world in general and in their family structure in particular. But the conventional thinking has not changed to the same degree and most men feel they have the right of control. A couple who were having marital problems sought advice. Both were earning members of the family and were expected to give their earnings to the man's mother who oversaw the running of the household. The woman once asked her mother-in-law for some money to buy a gift for her parents for their wedding anniversary. This was refused outright so rather than face the embarrassment of going without a gift, she called in sick and skipped the celebrations. At such times, it is necessary for the couple to discuss in detail the expectations of each other and both partners need to understand that their relationship as husband and wife is of paramount importance and supersedes all other relationships within the family. A realization of the utmost importance of the husband and wife relationship over that of any in the past is a vital cementing factor.

In some cases, despite no obvious reason, the marriage is shaky due to repeated inconsequential arguments. Sometimes it is a difference of opinion. Sometimes it is due to contradicting each other in the presence of children or outsiders. Often, it is due to unjustifiable outbursts of anger which one later regrets. In such cases each of the partners need to work on sharing these concerns and controlling their own negative emotions. If required one must seek the help of a counselor. Acknowledging one's shortcomings and accepting one's faults is the first step towards an effort to overcome them. It is a sign of strength and not weakness of character.

Marriage is a joint adventure of life in all its dimensions and can be one of the most fulfilling relationships with a little humility, understanding, appreciation of one another and mutual respect. Constant effort is required initially to keep alive and vibrant every aspect of marriage. Gradually, with time a comfort zone of security, love, and interdependence develops which helps to maintain closeness and confidence without effort. Consideration, care and transparency are the cornerstones of a sound base in a marriage.