

# **Characteristics of a Healthy Marriage**

The following healthy characteristics apply to all marriages.

## **Commitment to the Mutual Welfare of Each Partner**

One of the reasons people marry is that they believe they will be better off as “part of a team” than they would be alone. No matter how the terms of the partnership (marriage) are defined, its very essence is a commitment to the welfare of BOTH parties (spouses). In unhealthy partnerships, one party’s supposed well-being is maximized at the expense of the other. Healthy marriage, on the other hand, guarantees that the “fruits” of the partnership benefit both, if not equally, then at least enough so that the benefits of the partnership are better than those of being along..

## **Mutual Respect**

While it is in some sense true that “two shall become one”—that is, they give up a certain amount of autonomy to be part of a union—it is also true that the partnership is made up of two people who consent to the union. Healthy marriages involve partners who recognize and honor each other’s uniqueness and value. In unhealthy marriages, the members lose sight of each other as respectful individuals. Each becomes instead an extension of one’s self or an extension of one’s own ideas about the other. Too often, the other person then becomes who we think they are, and we treat them accordingly, rather than accepting who THEY say they are and treating them with respect as a separate individual.

## **Openness to a “Check up” on the Relationship**

From time to time, healthy marriages take an inventory to assess how they are doing. In unhealthy marriages, one or both parties resist any evaluation. Furthermore, any insufficiencies that are expressed are experienced as a threat, lending each spouse to become very defensive whenever reflection is attempted.

## **Willingness to Submit to a Informal or Formal Grievance Process**

Relationships “get into trouble” for a variety of reasons. Healthy marriages are willing to submit to some kind of process to address difficulties. Sometimes, that process is very informal, such as talking to a friend or relative. At other times, more formal processes

are explored, such as marriage counseling, mediation or talking with a member of the clergy. The willingness to engage in some form of grievance process actualizes all the above characteristics of a “healthy marriage”.

### **Non-abusive and Non-violent**

The exercise of power in a marriage is legitimate as long as it does not exceed certain parameters. Emotional, verbal and sexual abuse goes beyond the bounds of our socially acceptable behaviors in this society.

### **Flexible**

Sharing a life with another gives rise to innumerable obstacles related to value differences. A certain amount of flexibility is necessary to find ways of dealing with and living with natural differences. In unhealthy marriages, the solution to problems is made difficult when the parties tightly hold to “their own way”. One cannot live the same way with a partner as one would live alone—being flexible enough to create a life together is essential.

### **Loyal**

Being in a marital relationship means “forsaking all others.” This concept is closely related to the first, “commitment to the mutual welfare of each party”. One cannot adequately service the needs of another when compromised by other loyalties. Conflicts of interest destroy the ability to honor the well-being of the partner, and healthy marriages are made up of partners who are loyal to the union.

# **Additional Characteristics of a Healthy Marriage When the Partnership is Between Equals**

## **Commitments Beyond Mutual Welfare**

- 1. Commitment to mutual well-being.** It is not enough to only be committed to mutual welfare. Healthy marriages between equals must also be committed to mutual well-being. That is only realized when each party, from a subjective point of view, experiences their own lives as being as well-off as their partner's.
- 2. Commitment to resolving significant conflicts in mutually acceptable ways.** All serious conflicts must be resolved in ways that meet the approval of both parties. This puts a premium on conflict resolution and communication skills that are evident in healthy marriages between equals.
- 3. Commitment to the development and growth of each spouse.** In healthy marriages between equals, the emotional, spiritual and intellectual growth of each partner is supported and encouraged. Growth often precipitates conflict, but these difficulties are seen as being in service to the betterment of the individuals and the partnership in the long run.

## **Honesty**

Honesty is the most essential ingredient to a healthy marriage between equals because the primary focus of such a marriage is to generate intimacy. To the degree that one is not completely truthful, one cannot really be present for intimacy. The part that is not truthful remains outside the relationship and unavailable. Also, since one cannot be any more truthful to another than one can be to oneself, it is paramount to tell the truth to oneself and then be willing to tell that truth to the other, even if it may threaten the relationship.

## **Boundary Maintenance**

Boundary maintenance requires more attention in a relationship between equals than one between un-equals. In a relationship between un-equals, it is common for one party to make certain sacrifices for the mutual welfare of the partnership, either consciously or unconsciously. Furthermore, the necessity for the sacrifice is usually determined by only one of the partners. In a relationship between equals, however, sacrifices must be carefully balanced between the partners so as not to destroy the very essence of equality. Since making a sacrifice allows an intrusion into the "well-being" space, careful

consideration must be given. Also, in a relationship between equals, each party is equally responsible for maintaining his or her own boundary, deciding when and how much to let that boundary be permeable to the other and when to make it impermeable. The responsibility for maintaining this boundary is independent of the other spouse. Healthy marriages have flexible, permeable boundaries.

### **High Tolerance for Conflict**

Marriages between equals must tolerate considerable conflict. Since the definition of equality implies that neither party has more control over the way things “should” be done, everything is up for negotiations that must come to mutually acceptable arrangements. Since even similar people have differing values and certainly different value priorities, the situation is ripe for conflict. Good marriages between equals feed on the management of conflict to nourish the growth and development of the individuals AND the partnership.

### **Ability to Live with One’s Own Flaws**

It is one thing to live with the flaws of another, but it is another thing to live with one’s own blemishes. In a relationship between equals, each partner must be able to maintain an adequate sense of self (Ego), even when it becomes clear that personal standards have not been lived up to.

### **Emotional Autonomy**

None of the above is possible without emotional autonomy. This means that one spouse’s emotional state is not directly tied to the other’s; that there is some room for one party to be upset without the other becoming upset immediately. It also means that one’s opinion about oneself is independent of the other’s opinion. One can listen to the criticisms from the other without immediately buying into the opinion or getting defensive. One’s sense of self is stable but open to input and influence. Good marriages between equals have a good deal of emotional independence.

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