

The Power of a Weekly Marriage Meeting

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The institution of marriage arguably carries a heavier weight of pressures and expectations in the present age than it has in any time previous. Spouses don't just partner up for purely economic and procreative purposes — they expect to be romantic lovers, best friends, co-parents, and sometimes even business partners.

Balancing all of those roles might seem like a burden, and it certainly can be. Husbands and wives may both be working — and not just one job, but several. There are kids to raise and schedules to juggle. Family members can end up feeling like ships passing in the night.

But modern marriage is also an incredible opportunity — one that, if managed right, can be an unending source of joy and satisfaction. It's you and her, against the world, building your world.

But if you want to plan and tackle life's greatest adventures side-by-side, you've got to stay in-sync and work effectively as a team. As marriage therapist Marcia N. Berger puts it:

“the art of marriage is really the art of keeping up to date with your partner, of staying on track with your own and each other's life goals as they emerge, exist, and change. It is about supporting each other and staying connected emotionally, intellectually, physically, and spiritually.”

So how do you stay connected on all those levels?

Enter the weekly marriage meeting.

Berger suggests holding a weekly 30-minute meeting with your spouse that's broken into four parts: Appreciation (expressing gratitude to your spouse), Chores (making sure to-dos are getting done), Plan for Good Times (scheduling date nights, as well as individual and family activities), and Problems/Challenges (addressing conflicts/issues/changes in the relationship and in life in general).

The structure of the marriage meeting is designed to rekindle your romance, solidify your friendship, nip potential conflicts in the bud, and help you smoothly run your household economy. If you've already got a great marriage, then marriage meetings will enhance it. If your marriage has been struggling, the meetings can help you get your relationship back on track.

Kate and I recently started making marriage meetings a habit, have found them to be beneficial, and would recommend them to others. So today we'll walk you through the four parts of marriage meetings, as well as the nuts and bolts of how to implement them in your relationship.

The Benefits of Marriage Meetings

You may be wondering what the point is of holding an “official” weekly marriage meeting. If you and your wife talk about things like chores and activities in passing, then why sit down for a discussion during a dedicated time?

The answer is that you’ll go deeper on the things you’re already talking about superficially in snatches. You’ll also open on things you keep meaning to mention but haven’t — either because you keep forgetting or because you’ve felt uncomfortable and it never seems like the right time to talk about it.

Marriage meetings off-load concerns and ideas that are crouching on your mental bandwidth and bring closure to loose ends. They ensure you’re on the same page about everything that’s going on internally and externally and contribute to a home and family life that’s more orderly and harmonious. And they don’t just reconnect you as a couple during that half hour; in smoothing out snarls, encouraging appreciation, and laying plans for fun, they create the conditions for greater connection the rest of the time as well.

Consider marriage meetings as a weekly fueling stop — periodic maintenance for your relationship. You can only get so far off track in 7 days! Checking in each week thus ensures your relationship is always headed in the right direction.

The device might seem contrived, but if I’ve learned anything in life, it’s that nothing happens haphazardly. If you want a satisfying, fun-filled, long-lasting marriage, you’ve got to be intentional about it. And marriage meetings are a key way of doing that.

How to Execute a Marriage Meeting

The following are some of the guidelines Berger suggests for implementing and carrying out a marriage meeting:

1. Meet weekly. Doing the meeting at the same time each week can help make it a habit, but schedules change, and it’s fine to adjust the time as circumstances dictate.
2. Meet as just the two of you. This is a private meeting. No kids. If you’re already doing a weekly family meeting, that’s great; one does not supplant the other, but rather complements it. Meeting as husband and wife will ensure you’re on the same page when holding council with your kids.
3. Minimize distractions/interruptions. The best place to do a meeting is a comfortable, quiet spot in your home. Schedule a time when the kids are napping on the weekend, or after they go to bed during the week. Turn off the TV and your phones if you can. If you need your phone for scheduling, exercise self-control in not looking at distracting apps, or let an app exercise the control for you.

4. Sit together. Berger advises against sitting across a table from each other, as that can feel confrontational, and recommends sitting side-by-side instead. Kate and I, though, haven't had a problem with face-of-face marriage meetings (then again, we practice every day with our business meetings!). However, you position yourselves, Berger suggests sitting "close enough to feel like partners handling a project together."
5. Jot down notes during the week. It's useful to jot down notes in the days leading up to meeting on things you'd like to talk about. But you don't need to have a set agenda at the meeting, unless you're the uber-organized type. It can be free-flowing.
6. Bring your organizational devices/notebooks/apps to the meeting. You're going to be scheduling stuff and will want to write down dates and to-dos. So, bring your paper or digital planner, or use other apps to keep track of these. Kate and I use to do list for both our business and personal to-dos, as well as Google calendar.
7. Keep the meeting to about 30 minutes. A half hour is long enough to cover the 4 stages of the meeting, but short enough to keep it focused and productive. The meeting might be a little longer when you first start out and are getting the hang of it, or when you have more than usual to discuss. But err on the side of shorter over longer, so it doesn't feel like a drag.
8. Cultivate a positive atmosphere. Each spouse is responsible for coming to the meeting in a good mood and with an upbeat, patient, positive attitude. Each spouse should try to use a supportive tone throughout the meeting and abstain from any griping or criticism. (Constructively working on issues is okay — but not snark or empty complaining.) "A good goal for each meeting," Berger says, "is that it should inspire you to want to meet again a week later."
9. Allow both partners to feel ownership in the meeting. The more verbal partner should allow the less verbal partner to speak first at times, and should actively solicit feedback, instead of dominating the meeting.

While some of these guidelines, like keeping a positive attitude, are essential for the success of your marriage meetings, others can be tweaked and experimented with. See what works for you as a couple.

The 4 Parts of a Marriage Meeting

Experimentation can continue with exactly how you run your marriage meetings, but I'd recommend keeping to the 4 parts Berger recommends, done in this order; as we'll see, it has been structured in a deliberate way.

Appreciation

Appreciation kicks off each marriage meeting, and it consists of a simple, and yet surprisingly encouraging exchange of gratitude. Each person says, "everything you can think of that you specifically liked or admired about your partner during the past week."

Here are the guidelines for how the Appreciation part of a marriage meeting should work:

1. Plan ahead. If you're someone who finds it hard to remember the things you're grateful for, or to articulate them on the spot, take notes in a journal or app; when your spouse does something you appreciate, jot it down. Of course, you should thank them on the spot too; it's fine to repeat things you're grateful for at the meeting.
2. While one spouse speaks, the other listens. You'll take turns expressing your gratitude, and while one spouse is speaking the other actively listens and does not interrupt.
3. Be specific. General compliments are fine sometimes, but you should typically try to get as specific as possible; sharing details shows you were paying attention. So "I appreciated the amazingly delicious pot roast and blueberry cobbler you made on Tuesday" rather than "I appreciate your cooking."
4. Ask yourself "What else?" The goal here is to try to share everything you appreciated about your spouse the previous week. Once you've said a few things, ask yourself "What else?" to try to jog your memory and dislodge a few more compliments.
5. Keep it 100% positive. This is not the time for expressing complaints or disappointment. Avoid backhanded compliments — criticism in the guise of gratitude: "I appreciate that you actually washed the dishes last night for once instead of leaving them in the sink."
6. Touch on physical characteristics, behaviors, and character traits — big or small. Your appreciations can run the gamut — everything you like and admire about your spouse is on the table. Don't take anything for granted — be grateful even for small stuff. Here are some examples to get your gears turning:
 - I appreciate how you never check your smartphone when you're playing with the kids or talking to me.
 - You looked amazing in your blue dress at the party on Saturday night.
 - Thank you for sticking up for me when your mom tried to criticize my decision.
 - Thanks for taking the kids to the doctor this week.
 - I appreciate the conversation we had at dinner last night. Thanks for always reading interesting things and having interesting things to talk about.
 - Thanks for always greeting me with a kiss when I come home from work.
 - Thanks for letting me know you'd be coming home late on Tuesday.
 - I appreciate you watching the kids, so I could go play basketball.
 - I appreciate you cleaning up the bedroom yesterday.
 - I appreciate the hot sex we had last night.
 - I appreciate you filling the car up with gas for me.
 - Thanks for complimenting my work in front of your family.

The Appreciation part of a marriage meeting has several benefits. The open expression of gratitude rekindles feelings of warmth and intimacy, and makes each partner feel, well, appreciated. And,

through the power of positive reinforcement, in showing your spouse you notice the things they do, they'll more likely to do those things in the future. Paying more attention to the things you appreciate in your spouse will help you cultivate a more grateful mindset about life in general as well.

Starting with Appreciation also importantly sets a warm, positive, supportive vibe for the rest of the meeting.

Even if you express appreciation for each other on a regular, daily basis, it's still a beneficial exercise. Kate and I always try to thank each other even for small, routine, "expected" stuff; for example, even though she always makes dinner, and I always clean up the kitchen, we always say, "Thanks for doing that." And yet we still really enjoy this portion of the marriage meeting; you end up thinking of things you forgot to show appreciation for during the week, and it's just unexpectedly heartwarming to be acknowledged for who you are and what you do.

Chores (Including To-Dos/Finances)

Berger calls Chores "the business part of the meeting. Each of you says what you think needs to be done. You agree on priorities, timelines, and who will do each task. Teamwork is promoted, and jobs get handled."

You don't have to talk about chores for which you've already established a routine and division of duties that's working well. Instead, discuss chores that aren't getting done, and are occasional rather than re-occurring.

Negotiate and brainstorm ways to get neglected chores done more effectively and consistently. One spouse can volunteer to take on a task, or you can decide to take turns, or delegate it to one of the children in the family or to outside help (like hiring a housekeeper).

Don't demand that your spouse do a certain chore, but instead try to compromise. Don't fall into the tit-for-tat trap either, where you insist on things being split evenly. Strive instead for a flexible, generous, reasonable give-and-take. One partner can do more chores if the other works more paid hours; it may not be equal, but it's fair.

Really, you should ideally not think about the division of duties much at all; in the healthiest of relationships, partners often just see an undone chore and tackle it without asking whose job it is, without debate, and without having to exactly divvy up and assign tasks. You're in this together, after all.

If that describes your relationship, then just use the Chores part of your marriage meeting to discuss other to-dos — things around the house that need to be fixed, appointments that need to be made, etc. Decide who will take care of that to-do, create an action step ("Call plumber"), and set a deadline to have the task finished. To do list makes this very easy — you can share the list between

you, assign the to-do to you or your wife and set a date for its completion; if it doesn't get checked off by the deadline, to do list will send you a reminder that it's overdue.

You can also use this part of the meeting to talk about your finances, if there are things to discuss in that area.

At your next meeting, review what got done, offer progress reports, discuss why undone tasks weren't completed by the deadline, and set new goals and priorities for the coming week.

If an issue concerning chores, to-dos, or finances runs into a significant conflict, and/or becomes heated/emotional, then table it for the moment, and move its discussion to the Problems & Challenges part of the meeting.

Plan for Good Times

In the foreword to Berger's Marriage Meetings, therapist Linda Bloom notes that "cultivating a loving partnership isn't just about 'working on our relationship'; it's also about co-creating experiences that bring pleasure and happiness into each spouse's life."

In fact, I'd say happy marriages have almost nothing to do with "working on our relationship," and about 99% to do with striving to be an excellent, interesting, well-balanced person yourself, and doing things with your spouse that solidify your friendship and promote flourishing.

The "Plan for Good Times" portion of your marriage meeting helps you take concrete steps to do just that. You plan for:

1. A date for just the two of you. Ideally, you should be going out on a one-on-one date every week. That's not possible, or even necessary for everybody, so shoot for doing date night at least once a month. Remember, even if you're busy or feel you can't afford a regular night on the town, you can always plan a romantic at-home date.
2. Individual activities. When you and your wife met, a lot of what drew you to each other was the fact that you each had your own interests and hobbies, and you took care of yourself. You embodied an attractive vitality. Don't let that deteriorate after you get married by becoming complacent and losing yourself in the relationship. At your weekly marriage meeting, each partner should let the other know of at least one activity they'd like to do by themselves, or with a friend. It's not selfish; alone time renews an energy that's ultimately good for your marriage and your whole family.
3. Activities with mutual friends. Hanging out with others together has a strange way of renewing your own feelings of happiness and love for each other. You don't necessarily have to go out together with friends every week but aim for at least once or twice a month.
4. Family recreation. A family that has fun together, stays together. Instead of sitting around all weekend long, get out and do a micro-adventure. You can come up with some ideas at your marriage meeting, and then run them by your kids at your family meeting.

5. Family/couple vacations. Talk about how your plans are progressing for your next trip.

It's easy to talk about date nights and micro-adventures, but if you don't sit down and decide on a specific activity and time, you'll usually end up taking the path of least resistance and do nothing. By intentionally making plans for good times, you'll end up with a lot more fun in your life. Date nights build intimacy and maintain the spark between you and your wife, while hanging out alone, with friends, and as a family creates bonds and memories that both elevate your individual happiness, and the happiness of your relationship as well.

Problems & Challenges

The Problems & Challenges part of the marriage meeting comes last by design. By this time the two of you are feeling appreciated, are confident that chores will get done, and are already looking forward to the fun things you've planned to do together. You should hopefully be feeling upbeat and have the confidence to tackle any challenges you may be facing with each other, or from life in general.

In this part of the meeting, "each of you can bring up any concern — money, sex, in-laws, parenting, changing schedules, or something else." Here are some examples of the kinds of things you might talk about during Problems & Challenges:

- The (mis)behavior of one of your children and what to do about it
- Spouse isn't backing you up when you're disciplining the kids
- In-laws have been coming over too often (or you haven't visited your own parents enough)
- Where to spend Thanksgiving/Christmas
- Where to send a kid for school
- Unhappiness with how much time spouse is spending at work
- Lack of intimacy/unhappiness with the frequency of sex
- Spouse is always late for everything
- Mutual or individual unhappiness with the church you're attending
- Mutual or individual struggle with faith
- The frequency with which overnight guests have been visiting
- Spouse always leaves kitchen a mess
- Spouse makes critical comments about you in front of family/friends
- Conflict over budget
- Schedule of activities feels too packed
- Spouse is consistently in bad mood after work
- The desire to change jobs
- Whether to accept a job
- Spouse sabotages your diet
- Spouse has been drinking a lot

Problems & Challenges isn't a chance to issue a laundry list of grievances. Each spouse can pick, at the most, two issues to bring up per meeting.

Each partner should explain their sides of things or talk about the pros and cons of various choices. Brainstorm ideas for addressing the issue and try to reach a compromise or mutually agreed upon decision.

If one partner tends to go on and on, endlessly coming up with new issues and angles to talk about, and they get offended if you try to wrap things up, agree to use a timer and set it for 20 minutes. Then the timer can end things impersonally. If you haven't resolved something by the sound of the beep, agree to revisit the issue next week.

If you and your wife struggle to discuss issues without it becoming heated and acrimonious, review our articles on the commandments of clean communication, and how to communicate your needs in a relationship.

At your first few meetings, instead of bringing up serious, sensitive, contentious issues straight off, talk about things that will be easy to resolve. That way you'll build confidence in your ability to discuss and address issues together and come to associate the meetings with enjoyment rather than tension; having your first marriage meeting be acrimonious may cause you to drop the idea altogether.

Keep in mind that research says that almost 70% of marriage problems never get resolved. That doesn't mean they invariably lead to divorce. In healthy relationships, spouses are able to accept that their partner isn't ever going to change; yet they feel that their partner's positive traits outweigh their flaws and are grateful for them on the whole. Instead of solving problems, you can simply learn to manage them.

Happily, the stronger you keep your love and friendship, the easier that management process is; you won't notice things that bother you nearly as much. When you stay connected with each other and are physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually tight, you'll naturally have few interpersonal issues to talk about during Problems & Challenges; you can simply discuss the challenges you're facing together — side-by-side, looking out at the world as partners in crime and everything else.

And what helps you arrive at this level of harmony and intimacy? Holding a weekly marriage meeting of course!