

LIVING

Edited by Susan Schwartz  
susan.schwartz@scmp.com

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# Talk before you leap

Open communication before marriage could be the key to wedded bliss, writes **Hazel Parry**

The proposal has been made, the answer is yes and now you're both eagerly planning the big day. But before you take that journey down the aisle, consider the statistics: divorce is on the rise in Hong Kong, increasing to 14,873 in 2005 from 9,404 in 1995. One in every three marriages will end in divorce.

But there are ways to boost your chances of living happily ever after. Experts say couples who begin their lives together by talking frankly about issues such as sex, money, expectations, worries and even humdrum practicalities are more likely to handle problems encountered in marriage.

"Most people don't talk about things before they get married because they're in this place of romantic bliss where they feel like they complete one another," says Hong Kong marriage counsellor Julie Gallinat.

"But I think [asking the right questions] makes the difference between blindly walking into marriage and knowing what you're getting into. People who do this early in their relationship are smart. It means they're not blindsided by what happens in every relationship, which is that the romance dies to a certain degree and struggle ensues." Marie and Tom found out the

hard way how important it is to communicate before getting married. Both in their mid-30s, they're now in the process of getting divorced after six years of marriage. "We married too quickly, I guess," says Marie. "We'd known each other 18 months and thought we knew everything there was to know. There were things we weren't too keen on, but we thought they'd go away or we chose to ignore them."

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Julie Gallinat, marriage counsellor

"I like to be organised and always have everything planned. Tom's a very spontaneous person. He does things on the spur of the moment. I loved that about him at first."

"But he behaved like that all the time. I'd get a phone call saying he wasn't coming home because he was on his way to Macau with a friend. Or he'd say, 'Let's take today off'."

"He had the same attitude to money. He'd just splash out and not worry about the consequences. I can't do that and we'd often end up in rows over money. I was always telling him to grow up and he was always telling me to lighten up."

"If we'd talked about what we wanted out of our life, maybe we could have worked something out or we may never have married." Here are some of the questions couples should think about:

### How many children?

Don't assume that your partner wants the same as you – or that they'll change their minds. There are some men out there who mean it when they say that they don't want children. Likewise, not every woman hears her biological clock ticking.

Another big question to address in Hong Kong, where raising one child can run into millions of dollars: How many can we afford?

### Should we go Dutch?

Money is at the root of many arguments in a marriage. You need to be clear from the start about the lifestyle your shared income will allow. There's also the important question of bank accounts: Should you open a joint account or keep separate accounts and share costs?

### Where's the will?

According to will writer Janet Cribb, you should definitely make a will before you get married.

Cribb of wheresthewill.com says there are consequences to not doing so. "In Hong Kong, if a husband dies intestate, the wife doesn't get everything. She'll receive a limited amount known as the statutory legacy and the rest is divided among surviving members of his family and vice versa."

### Career opportunities

A career may be more important to one partner or equally to both. How much are you prepared to sacrifice for your partner's ambitions? Would you be willing to leave if their job took them out of Hong Kong?

### The in-laws

Of course they love you and will come in handy for babysitting, but interfering in-laws can hinder more than they help. Set your boundaries early – and, if you dare, let your parents know how you feel.

### Love me, love my dog

This is an issue on par with children – and some animal lovers take it more seriously. If you get divorced, who'll get custody of Rover?

### How's your health?

There may be health issues you need

## How to broach those niggling issues

Bombarding your partner with questions may send them running. A better way to broach those difficult – and often unromantic – issues is to turn your questions into statements about yourself as a means to start a discussion, says Hong Kong relationship counsellor Julie Gallinat.

Rather than asking how they feel about infidelity or whether they have debts, begin the discussion with something along the lines of: "My thoughts on infidelity are ..." or "The things I'm not prepared to give up are ..."

Gallinat says more can be learned from a person if they've initiated the conversation and "are sharing with you what they want to share, rather than being interrogated". People tend to be defensive when that happens.

What if your partner's response isn't what you want to hear? Is it time to call off the wedding? No. When a couple reaches a "your way or my way" struggle, it's often a sign of growth. "The purpose is not to grow together or to become one," she says. "The purpose is to grow to be able

to see your partner as completely separate from yourself and to be comfortable knowing that your partner has a different point of view.

"When two people are far apart on something, they need to be able to listen to each other about where their commitment to that idea comes from," she says. "Usually, it's rooted in childhood. Usually just by having compassion and empathy for the other, they change."

Hazel Parry

to address – even if it's just a niggle such as your partner's smoking. Mention it now, because changing expectations can lead to conflict.

### Let's talk about sex

Almost every consuming passion will eventually fade. Talk about what you expect from your sex life. Discuss preferences, fantasies and, most importantly, how you both feel about fidelity.

### Should old acquaintances be forgot?

You need to be clear about what role your friends will play in your married life and how you'll spend

your free time: together, alone or separately with others?

If you have worries about friends and boys' or girls' nights out, try to get to the root of your concerns. Jealousy of a spouse's friends is a real problem for some couples – and often not one they consider before getting married.

### Will you still love me when I'm 64?

Hopefully, the answer will be yes, but take this one a bit deeper and ask your partner how they picture your life together in the future? If someone can't envisage the long-term, it could be a warning sign.

**How do you feel about counselling?** It isn't just for couples in trouble, says Richard Gee of the Resource Counselling Centre. Young couples who undergo premarital counselling do so for a variety of reasons.

"Sometimes it's fear and to be sure they're not making a crazy mistake," says Gee. "Sometimes it's because of a problem already there such as niggling things that recur – arguments out of the blue or habits that don't seem to be changing."

Gee recommends that couples talk about issues before marriage and carry on the conversation afterwards to avoid arguments and build a lasting relationship.

## Dilemma: Home under siege

**My wife seems to get annoyed by the smallest things, especially when she has had a hard day at the office. When she comes home from work, our children avoid her in case she's in a bad mood. Even I wait to approach her until I know I won't be yelled at for something she perceives as not being up to her standard around the house. She's not violent, but I'm frightened about the effect her behaviour will have on our children.**

You have good reason to be concerned about your children and the state of your marriage as well. Your home life sounds awful. You and the children are anxious and worried about being criticised most of the time. Your wife seems to be frustrated, overwhelmed, angry and erratic. Your family life seems more about fear, unhappiness and instability than anything else and this is a difficult way to live.

Children don't flourish with unpredictable anger and tension. It's difficult for them to develop self-esteem and confidence in their ability to cope with the normal stresses of childhood if they're on edge at home. Learning academic and social skills are difficult. Children need positive support at home to go out and take on challenges so they can grow into

confident, independent adults. And since you spend so much energy avoiding being criticised by your wife, you're adversely affected, too. Your wife can't be happy either. She seems distressed and disconnected from the family except in angry ways.



Your family has developed a dysfunctional system to support this painful life. Everyone has learned to cope with the situation, but no one has challenged it. No one is appreciated or supported. Your home is an emotionally unsafe place and it must change to provide a nurturing life for everyone.

It's time to sit down with your wife to work out the practical day-to-day frustrations in a realistic way you can all live with. You need to express supportive and positive appreciation and caring for your wife, rather than hiding out to avoid being yelled at. As well, you need to make demands on her to reciprocate positive, appreciative feelings about your role and the children's desire to please and care for her. Your wife has trouble handling stress and anger and she may need to work on developing better skills in managing her feelings when she's upset. She can do this by using techniques in self-help books or by working with a therapist.

However, this problematic situation is a family system issue. You've all allowed this tense situation to continue out of fear of standing up to your wife, and your family are becoming estranged from each other. You must all change the way you deal with each other. You all need to develop new rules for this family that will provide feedback that's supportive, nurturing and loving. Underneath your wife's highly strung actions is a woman who feels unappreciated and depressed. She needs caring and tenderness, and recognition of her hard work.

There has been enough scolding and worry in this household. A couple of sessions with a family therapist may well be the easiest and quickest way to get all of you on the right track. Children deserve to grow up in a loving, caring and safe environment. They need parents who provide good role models so they can grow up to become good spouses and parents. And you and your wife deserve to be cherished and supported by each other. That's what good marriages and good families are all about.

Sharon Glick is a social worker and holds a master's degree. Questions can be sent via susan.schwartz@scmp.com

## Signposts: Sheer magnetism

### Michelle Gabbe

"Whether you think you can do something or think you can't, either way you're probably right" – wise words from innovator Henry Ford. But, in the midst of a crisis, how can you harness the power of positive thinking?

Thoughts come first, then emotions, followed by behaviours, which feed back into more thoughts.

We know we can make ourselves feel worse, or even sick, by dwelling on a disastrous situation. Often, we have the notion that if we suffer long enough, and "stew in our own juices," we'll have earned the right to feel better. Stewing in your own juices is the way to describe what's happening. Every recurring thought sends out a biochemical message to the body to do this or that. So, if you find yourself repeatedly saying, "It doesn't matter what I eat, I can't lose an ounce", this tells the body to enact metabolic wizardry that will allow it to hold onto excess weight.

We're all familiar with the effects of adrenaline, which we can call on for a blast of energy or a surge of creative brilliance. But this isn't the only hormone at your disposal. Oxytocin, sometimes called the hormone of love, is best known for labour induction. Scientists say its soothing, anti-stress effect speeds

wound healing, diminishes pain, and counteracts sexual impotence. Your body is stimulated to produce oxytocin naturally whenever you give selflessly or feel loved, and during yoga, spiritual practice, exercise and affectionate touching of people or even pets.

One client describes nearly every work project as "an utter disaster". And sure enough, his business is littered with crises, he has high blood pressure and gets angry whenever his employees dare to challenge his negative outlook. I ask him to derail his hopeless train of thought with phrases such as, "What if I had a flash of insight around this situation? What if there were 10 solutions to this problem?"

Recognising the destructive effects of negative thinking on the body, how can you switch from fearful pessimism to calm optimism in a crisis? Try these techniques.

• **Breathe** In the midst of overwhelming feelings and upsets, turn your attention to your breath. Breathe in for five counts, then allow the exhalation to complete itself naturally and slowly. Imagine watching the air move into your system and then back out. After 10 breaths or so, don't be surprised if you feel a huge yawn well up and out – a good sign that negative energy is being released. You might also get a

flash of insight, or a solution you hadn't previously thought of.

• **Smile** Again, simple but effective. Think of someone you love who makes you laugh. Failing that, force a smile. Research has shown that even faking the facial movements that produce a smile signals the body to secrete feel-good endorphins and strengthen the immune system.

• **Write** Coaches often ask their clients to act as if something they desire has already happened. It's a way of tricking the subconscious into believing that an experience can easily be repeated. So, quickly, with no editing, fill a page describing the situation: how you feel, whose fault it is, what you fear will be the outcome, and so on. Shred, or even burn, the paper. Now do the opposite. Create a second page detailing how you would like the situation to be if everything and everyone involved were perfected. You have just magnetised yourself to attract what you desire.

For those who tend to get clarity by hearing yourself talk through an issue, replace the writing process by sharing your story with a non-judgmental, willing friend.

Michelle Gabbe is a member of the Hong Kong International Coaching Community (info@coachinghk.org)