

Setting the Marital Stage The First Two Years in Marriage are Critical

By Sheri & Bob Stritof

As the topic of matrimonial success and divorce is studied more and more, research is showing that how a couple weathers their first two years together can make or break their marriage. A study, "The Connubial Crucible: Newlywed Years as Predictors of Marital Delight, Distress, and Divorce" by Ted L. Huston, John P. Caughlin, Renate M. Houts, Shanna E. Smith, and Laura J. George was published in The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (2001;80:237-252).

According to Dr. Huston of the University of Texas at Austin, "This study showed that couples' newlywed marriages and changes in their union over the first 2 years foreshadow their long-term marital fate after 13 years... disillusionment—as reflected in an abatement of love, a decline in overt affection, a lessening of the conviction that one's spouse is responsive, and an increase in ambivalence—distinguishes couples headed for divorce from those who establish a stable marital bond." The researchers discovered "differences between the happily married and unhappily married groups were apparent right after they tied the knot."

The study looked at 156 couples who were married for the first time in 1981. Researchers discovered that after 13 years:

- 68 couples were happily married
- 32 couples were unhappily married
- 56 couples had divorced

The couples who divorced within the first two years showed signs of disillusionment and were negative toward one another in the first two months of their marriage. It is a sign of trouble if a newlywed couple starts to have disillusionment within the first year. The couples who are still happily married are couples who were able to have positive feelings about their spouse in the first two years.

If you find yourself a bit depressed after your wedding, it's ok. It's normal. You've both been caught up in time consuming wedding preparations. It is a sure bet that once you don't have that stress to deal with, you will have a sense of loss. It's similar to the post holiday let down that many people experience.

However, it is important to not ignore this period of depression. Being prepared for the newlywed blues can help you get past them. It's time to move on to setting the marital stage for the rest of your lives together. As mentioned by Dr. Huston's study, a top priority for newlyweds should be keeping romance alive.

Other priorities a couple needs to face the first year include how to allocate and handle money, who's going to do what chores, ways to spend free time, finding time to have sex, dealing with in-laws, understanding differences including spirituality, learning how to deal with conflict, and discussing expectations.

Couples need to watch for these red flags:

- lack of romance and intimacy
- inability to have fun together
- selfishness
- fear of conflict
- lack of respect
- over commitment of time to other things
- over spending
- too much dependence on parents
- sexual problems
- addictions and/or substance abuse
- emotional and/or physical abuse
- unrealistic expectations
- married before age 20

Although the first couple years are said to be the most difficult, they are often remembered as the most joyous. They can be a tremendous time of intimacy and discovery. There is so much to learn about one another and so much to express to one another.

The newlywed stage of marriage is where you can build the foundation and set the stage for a life-long, meaningful marriage. So enjoy and romance one another!

Sheri & Bob Stritof are the Marriage Guides for the website about.com. This article was taken from about.com with their permission.