

Premarital Mastery

5 Things You Need to Know *Before* You Get Married



Courtesy of TheMarriageRestorationProject.com

FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

As I see young couples getting divorced left and right it pains me greatly. While I know how hard marriage can be, I also know personally that it can be better. In *Premarital Mastery*, you will learn that the two reasons why marriages fail are unrealistic expectations and lack of tools. If couples could learn about the nature of relationships as well as skills that they can employ in their marriage before their wedding, they would not only be much more willing to stick things out, they would actually enjoy their relationship!

That is why I am so glad you are reading *Premarital Mastery*! I am excited for you to know this life-saving information now before you get married so you can experience more enjoyment and less heartache later on.

(One word of caution. I do not intend to create confusion or second guesses about your marriage choice. If you are in a fragile place, go to a competent therapist that can help you. You can also email me personally at info@themarriagerestorationproject.com)

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REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

The 1st step in **Premarital Mastery** is that before you get married you need to have realistic expectations. By realistic expectations, I mean to realize that every relationship has its ups and downs. I remember when my wife and I were engaged. We thought our relationship was different. We wouldn't have any problems. We were annoyed when friends and family would warn us about the realities of marriage. Looking back, I can say we were a bit **naïve**.

This naïveté was very damaging to our relationship.

If we were to have expected conflict
and understood its purpose,
we would have been saved
from a lot of unnecessary pain.

And our marriage wasn't even that bad! How could it be that the one with whom we "fell in love" became an enemy? This wasn't who we thought we were marrying! Did we make the wrong choice? The confusion and doubt went on and on. If only we had known that conflict was inevitable, we would not have been so confused and hurt.

Creating Your Own Emotional Reality

Expectations are powerful and make all the difference between anxiety and peace of mind. When we expect something to go our way and it doesn't, we get upset.

Here's an example: Let's say my newborn wakes up throughout the night. If I expect him to only wake up twice during the night and he wakes up three or four times, I have two choices. I can get angry because he is not "supposed" to be up now and get all worked up about how I'm going to

function the next day on no sleep. I am so frustrated that I can't even get him back to bed.

Or I can accept that things may not have gone as planned but I need to make the best out of it and be calm and help him get back to bed. This also means not catastrophizing about my lack of sleep. The differences between these two approaches is huge and when I throw my expectations out the window, and my ego about how I want things to go, I allow myself to be present and ask the question, "What does G-d want from me now?" Instead of reacting unconsciously by being so locked up in expectations about things going my way, I can be calm enough to make a conscious choice about how I am going to act.

Relationship Stages

The same applies to marriage. If you have expectations of how you think it is supposed to be, it may be very hard for you to "let go" when things don't go your way. One of the most helpful ways to shatter your expectations of sheer bliss is to understand that a relationship has stages. This means that there is a normal progression for a marriage- and that your plunge from infatuation to conflict does not mean there is something wrong with your marriage.

Let me explain. I am sure you have wonderful stories about how you and your future spouse met or knew you wanted to get married. You may even feel that it was Divinely orchestrated.

I believe your marriage was Divinely orchestrated,
just as I believe the ensuing conflict you
will experience is part of the Divine plan.

Marriage is the greatest growth opportunity you may ever experience. You wind up marrying the person who is perfect for you in that he/she is the one most capable of being a catalyst for your growth and completion. That growth comes about through conflict. You are probably too excited to be

aware of the possible areas of conflict that lay ahead, and I don't want you to get all nervous and start trying to figure out what they are necessarily.

Most engaged couples are in, what we call in Imago Therapy, the **Romantic Stage**. Your brain is wired with chemicals that probably give you an adrenaline rush. You may be thinking about each other all the time, feel like you've known your intended forever, and see only positive qualities in each other. This is normal and necessary. If you were to see each other's flaws, you would probably get so wrapped up in your head that you would never get married.

The anesthesia eventually wears off, sometimes even before the wedding, and you have officially crashed into the **Power Struggle**. The Power Struggle is a fun place where most couples find themselves for the majority of their relationship.

It is only through understanding that by working through the Power Struggle and becoming conscious about your relationship, can you achieve the Real Love that awaits.

This does not happen overnight but the acknowledgment that conflict is for the purpose of growth and healing and that your spouse will trigger the very things in you that you will need to become more whole, will serve as good preparation for the rough patches that may arise.

Summary of what you learned in Premarital Mastery Lesson 1

- Unrealistic expectations set a relationship up for failure
- Our expectations make the difference between anxiety and peace
- There is an unconscious component to choosing our spouse
- The purpose of marriage is growth and healing
- Following the romantic stage comes the power struggle
- Working through the power struggle brings about growth and healing

Lesson 2

YOUR RELATIONSHIP STYLE

As a general rule, energy expands outwards or contracts inward. We find, in relationships, that couples complement each other. In order for the relationship to be balanced and whole, there is always one who is maximizing energy outward and one who is minimizing inward. (Please note that the purpose of these terms is not to label people or shame them; rather, they are a description of the way our energy is expressed in our relationship.) While women are usually the maximizers/hailstorms and men are the minimizers/turtles, this changes, depending upon the context. For example, a woman might be a maximizer with her husband but a minimizer with her mother. In addition, although each person has his or her own natural response, we typically function in opposition to our partners. That means that, even if both husband and wife are minimizers, in their relationship to each other, one will play the role of the maximizer.

Where Do You Go To Get Safe?

This is another important pre-engagement counseling concept. Why is it so significant to understand this concept? Our expression of energy can be very unsafe for our spouse. When a hailstorm feels threatened, she tends to expand her energy outward, magnifying everything in a crisis. On the other hand, a threatened turtle holds in or tones down his energy, defending himself or retreating into his shell. When we were younger, we learned how to respond to stress or discomfort by reacting in one of these two manners. While this kept us safe as a child, it does not serve us well in a mature, intimate relationship.

The reason why it is no longer helpful is that the very way we get safe is what triggers our partner. The threatened hailstorm, who pushes her energy outward and creates a big drama, forces our turtle to feel unsafe and to retreat deeper in to his shell, which then provokes more of a threat and more drama from the hailstorm. The process does not cease, leaving the hailstorm

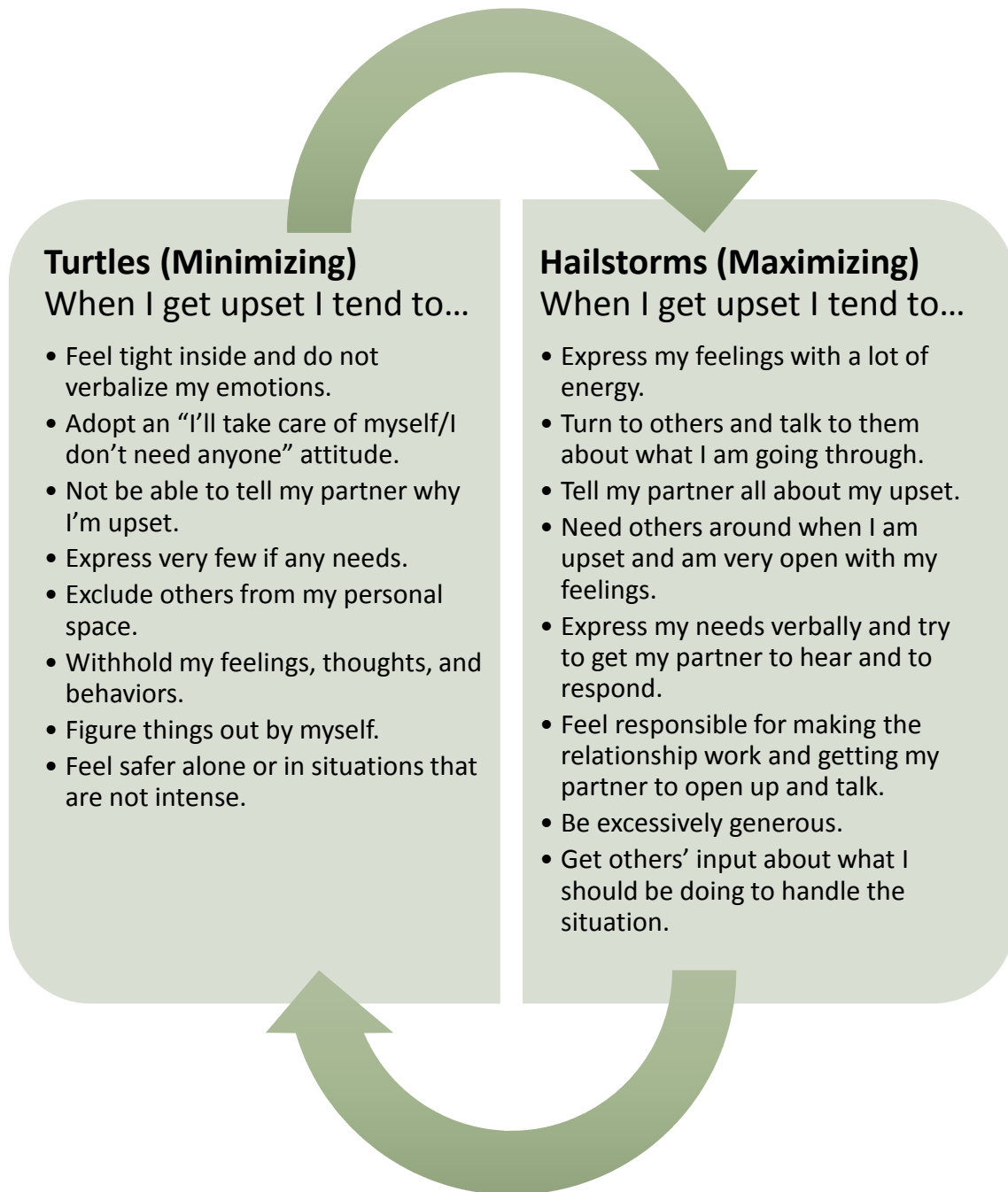
wondering why her husband is so cold and unavailable and the turtle wondering why his wife is so mean and critical.

Becoming Conscious of Our Styles - The First Step to Change

Once we understand what is happening in this interchange, we can adjust our approach. My wife isn't out to get me; she is actually feeling unsafe, and does not intend to harm me. My husband is not trying to avoid me; he is actually feeling threatened and does not intend to hurt me. This consciousness awakens within us compassion and curiosity to find out what is making our spouse unsafe, instead of our previous feelings of threat and fear. We no longer have to dramatize or run away when we experience this behavior; we can break the cycle by engaging in a safe Imago dialogue (as we will learn about in the next step of **Premarital Mastery**). The more safety we bring into our relationship, the less need for us to revert to our old patterns.

Hailstorm or Turtle?

The following checklist is designed to help you learn more about yourself and how you typically get safe. The purpose is to foster a greater awareness so that you can act from a more conscious place. Place a plus or a minus by the behavior that applies to you most often.



Now, complete this sentence: "When I get upset, I tend to become like a (Turtle) (Hailstorm) (depending on which got more plus marks in the above chart) to hide my fear of/that..."

Write what fear you think your habitual response is hiding. (The fear may not be apparent.) For example, you could write: "being unimportant," "that you don't love me," "that you will leave me," "that you will control me," "that you will smother me," "that you will reject me."

Summary of what you learned in Premarital Mastery Lesson 2

- In a relationship there is always one partner maximizing energy and the other minimizing energy.
- Our expression of energy can be very unsafe for our spouse.
- When we become aware of our energy styles we can have compassion for each other and stop negative patterns.
- Creating safety prevents us from needing to engage in old patterns

Lesson 3

THE IMAGO DIALOGUE

We mentioned in the last step that creating safety in your relationship is the key to breaking the turtle/hailstorm pattern. When both sides feel safe they do not need to run away or attack to protect themselves. One of the best ways to create safety is through the Imago Dialogue.

The Best Candidates for Dialogue

Engaged or newly married couples are often perfect candidates for learning the dialogue because they are usually less jaded and more motivated to learning new things to benefit their relationship. It can be fun to relate to each other in this new way. My wife and I sure wish someone had taught us about the dialogue process before we had to wait two years into our marriage. It would have helped us prevent small miscommunications from blowing up. It also could have helped us process our feelings when we were hurt. Finally, it would have helped us not take everything so personally when we realized that when the other is sharing it is primarily something we triggered in them from their own world.

How to Dialogue

Here is a very concise summary of how it works. The first thing you want to do is make sure it is a good time to talk. The best way to do this is to arrange a time when you can both sit down and focus on each other.

Next, you want to choose who will be doing the talking. In a dialogue there is a sender- the one talking, and a receiver- the one listening. The dialogue process allows the sender to feel truly heard. This is accomplished by having the receiver **mirror** what the sender says. The receiver simply repeats or paraphrases what their spouse says and then asks if they got it ("Did I get you?"), and if there is more ("Is there more?") they want to share. This continues until the sender says everything they want to express.

After you have fully mirrored your spouse and there is no more he/she wants to share about the topic, you have reached the **validation** component of the Dialogue. This is when you let your spouse know that “what you said makes sense.” This does not necessarily mean that you agree, rather it is acknowledging that you understood him/her and accept that what he/she said is valid from their point of view.

Finally, it is time for **empathy**. This is where you truly get in your partner's shoes.” I imagine you might be feeling ... Is that right?” Try to pick two emotions that you think he/she is feeling and check in.

While there are some more advanced components to the dialogue as well as some deepening work that can be done with the help of a skilled facilitator, this step of Premarital Mastery is to give you basic tools for safe communication.

Benefits for the Listener

The dialogue creates safety because it requires the listener to hold their fire. While it requires a lot of discipline not to respond, it is worth the effort. It allows you to remain calm and not slip into reactivity. It gets you to feel safe enough to hear what the other is saying without taking it as a personal attack. Instead of every interchange penetrating your heart like a dagger, chipping away at your sense of well-being, you are holding up a mirror to reflect and deflect.

Benefits for the Sender

Mirroring is also beneficial for the one being mirrored. Whenever there is conflict, reactivity, or resistance in a relationship, it is a sign that somebody is feeling unsafe. Mirroring defuses the emotional charge from the other side and allows one to feel safe. Your spouse no longer needs to prove his point or protect himself by being reactive. He feels that you heard him. The experience one feels when they are heard in a compassionate way is very calming. It moves us away from the reactive part of our brain into a more cognitive place.

Next time you are about to “turtle” or “hailstorm,” make a time to dialogue. It will help you relate to your partner in a more mature and adult way. Every relationship has issues and if you were to merely focus on problem-solving, once you solve one, another will arise. Learning this skill set that enables you to work through your issues in a safe and connected way is much more valuable.

Summary of what you learned in Premarital Mastery Lesson 3

- The Dialogue process can help you avoid a lot of unnecessary hurt in your relationship.
- There are three parts: mirroring, validation, and empathy
- The listener, by not responding, is able to become safe and not take things personally
- The sender, by feeling heard, is able to become safe and not feel the need to prove his/her point.
- While you may have many issues, the key is to learn how to work with them.

Lesson 4

THE FEAR/SHAME DYNAMIC

Before you start that dialogue that you learned about in the last step, there is a crucial piece of information that you need to know about gender differences. What would you say in the following scenario: Picture a homeless man on the street. What would be most difficult for him? Would it be similar for a homeless woman? According to the book, How to Improve Your Marriage Without Talking About it, by Drs Patricia Love and Steven Stosny, studies show that while men and women both fear homelessness equally, they do so in different ways. If you were to ask a woman, her main fears would be harm, isolation, and deprivation. Most men would say that the most difficult part would be feeling like a failure. While safety may be an issue for men, the utter shame of being on the street, unemployed, etc... is the primary concern.

Becoming Conscious of Each Other's Triggers

This gender distinction is key to establishing and maintaining connection in marriages. Men must be conscious not to trigger their wives' fears and women must be conscious not to shame their husbands. This comes up quite often around career. If a man is struggling to find a career path, is dissatisfied at work, or even unemployed, this can be very scary for women who are relying on their husband to support. At the same time it can be a shameful experience for men in that position. (This is especially common with newly married couples as they are often on the younger end and not always established in their careers. Many newly married couples are still in school and some may not have even made up their mind about career aspirations. This can be a recipe for disaster when money becomes tight.)

I have heard numerous stories from couples where male shame is exacerbated by female fear around employment issues and vice versa. In fact, fear and shame become a cycle where her anxiety causes his shame and his shame causes her anxiety.

The only way to break this vicious cycle is to be attentive to each other's vulnerability.

The Dangers of Talking

Another classic example of a potentially shame producing setting is talking about the relationship. While many women feel that talking helps them feel better, men dread it. This is why many men do not want to come for marriage counseling. They aren't "good at" expressing their emotions and talking about their feelings. Therefore, a counseling setting can be a shaming experience for a man, turning a seemingly benign encounter into yet another opportunity to fail. When couples come to see me, I often remind them to avoid blaming language in sessions. I will tell the "blaming" spouse- he really wants to hear what you have to say and understand you so that you can improve your connection. He is going to have a hard time if he feels he is being accused or criticized and will feel even more disconnected. Try sharing your feelings in a way where you take ownership.

But what about the dialogue? Didn't we learn in the last installment of the pre-engagement counseling eCourse that it can help with staying connected even during a difficult issue?

The main purpose of the dialogue is a vehicle to connect safely, what we all so deeply desire in a relationship. Talking is a means towards connection but is not an end in and of itself.

Summary of what you learned in Premarital Mastery Lesson 4

- The vicious cycle of the fear/shame continuum
- Become conscious of your spouse's triggers and stop the cycle
- Talking can be difficult for men and exacerbate conflict
- The purpose of the dialogue is safe connection

Lesson 5

POSITIVITY

Positivity? That should be easy for a newly married couple! Yet, inevitably couples enter the power struggle and the relationship can become quickly mired in negativity. One of the ultimate goals of your relationship is to transform it into a zone of zero negativity. Ridding negativity from your relationship is essential to create a successful marriage.

Psychologist John Gottman researched the key ingredients for a successful relationship to such an extent that he claims he is able to watch a couple interact for a brief period of time and determine whether their marriage will last. Quite scary!

One of the necessary components for a lasting relationship is that there needs to be five positive statements for every one negative one.

For most couples this requires a constant effort to find the good in their relationship and share that appreciation with their spouse.

The Four Critical Moments

There are many different activities that can help infuse your relationship with positive energy. Regular appreciations, caring behaviors, and date night are all examples of necessary ingredients to help nurture your marriage. One helpful notion introduced by Gary Brainerd is the “four critical moments.” The four critical moments are the first four minutes both of you are awake, the morning “goodbye”, the first four minutes you are both home in the evening “good night”. By being extra vigilant to be loving and caring at those moments, you can make a big difference for your relationship.

Transition times are hard for many of us. These four critical transitions we experience in our day set the tone for our relationship. Have you ever woken

up and just knew it would be a bad day? Everything that could go wrong, did go wrong. By starting the day in a loving and caring way, it sets the tone for a loving and caring day. As you leave in the morning and part each other, you take that love with you. When you return home from a stressful day, you dedicate those first moments towards each other and detox from the outside world. Finally, when you go to bed at night, you fall asleep with positive feelings for each other.

While you most likely will not be able to be conscious about your relationship all of the time, if you pay extra care to these four critical moments, you will be building for a successful future together.

Summary of what you learned in Premarital Mastery Lesson 5

- The importance of turning your marriage into a zone of zero negativity
- Research shows that for every one negative interaction, five positive are needed to counteract
- Pay extra attention to being loving during the four critical moments of your day.

I hope you enjoyed Premarital Mastery: 5 Things You Need to Know Before You Get Married. You learned 5 powerful concepts you can use to create an incredible relationship:

1. Realistic Expectations
2. Your Relationship Style
3. The Imago Dialogue
4. The Fear/Shame Dynamic
5. Positivity

Congratulations again on your upcoming marriage! We are here for you if things start getting rocky, and the sooner that you can deal with the issues the better.

With best wishes for your relationship success,
Shlomo and Rivka Slatkin

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Shlomo Slatkin is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor, Certified Imago Relationship Therapist (Advanced Clinician), and an ordained Rabbi. Rivka Slatkin is Director of Engagement of The Marriage Restoration Project, with a degree in Health Administration. They are co-founders of The Marriage Restoration Project and authors of the best-selling book, *The Five Step Action Plan to a Happy and Healthy Marriage*.



They can be reached at www.theMarriageRestorationProject.com.

What Is The Marriage Restoration Project?

Getting good at marriage is the same as getting good at anything. It takes knowledge, skill, and practice, plus continuing education.

No one with a great marriage got that way without skilled instruction, unless they had parents that modeled how to have a really great relationship. Every marriage needs guidance, support, education, kudos, and encouragement on a regular basis.

Getting good at marriage is not a one time thing. A marriage needs daily maintenance.

Marriage support is a lifelong endeavor. And you can achieve marital bliss. We can help you get there.

We founded The Marriage Restoration Project because we want you to be able to get the best marriage help that is out there, no matter where you live. You're in the right place, at the right time. In our opinion (*and in the opinion of our couples!*) the best marriage support is right here.

The Buzz...

Keeping couples **together and happy** is what we do best. Our Marriage Mastery [online marriage course](#) participants affectionately refer to our program as "a Marriage LifeSaver", in that it navigates the listener out of the daily negativity and conflict that they are experiencing in a simple, clean, easy-to-understand, and direct way.

Marriage mastery is attainable and well within your reach. To begin learning how to have an amazing marriage, enroll in our [Marriage Mastery](#) online marriage course today!

Our work here at The Marriage Restoration Project is personal. We love keeping couples together and happy and seeing marriages flourish! Contact us today if you would love to create an amazing relationship!

