

# 101 Questions to ask **Before** You Get **Engaged**



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Author of *Before You Say "I Do"*



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## **Warning—Never Marry (or Get Engaged to) a Stranger**

**Y**EARS AGO THERE WAS A VERY POPULAR love song, “Getting to Know You, Getting to Know All About You.” Well, that’s probably the best advice to follow if you’re thinking of engagement.

This is not a book about marriage or how to prepare for getting married. It’s more basic than that. It’s designed to help you answer the question, “Is this the one I want to even consider as a marriage partner? Is this the person I want to be engaged to as the next step to marrying them?”

During my years of counseling, I’ve heard so many people say, “The person I married was not the same one I honeymooned with. It’s as though they changed overnight. What happened?”

The answer is simple. They married a stranger. There was either courtship deception, or naïveté or not enough questions were asked. Thus, many marriages falter. That’s why this book was written—to give you some of the questions you need answers to *now*, not later, in order to make a wise decision.

Let’s assume you have sufficient money to purchase a new car. You go to the auto mall where there are 16 dealerships...with cars of all makes, models, colors, vintages, and prices. You pull into the lot, park, and stroll over to this “great looking” car. It’s a previously owned model (which means *used*). It’s been around the block a few times. But you really like the way it looks and smells, and it’s comfortable inside. There are a number of gadgets, including a GPS.

A salesperson comes up and asks if he can help you. You respond

with, “You sure can. I want to buy this car.”

“Great. What would you like to know about it?”

“Know? What’s there to know? I saw it. I like it. I want it—let’s draw up the paperwork.”

“Well, I can do that. Do you have any questions about its warranty, performance, estimated mileage, or the GPS? And since it’s a recent addition, we haven’t even put the price on it. Don’t you want to know that?”

“Not really. All I know is I want it. And you don’t even have to wrap it up for me!”

Would you buy a car in this way? It’s doubtful. It’s almost ridiculous. If you did, you’d be going into it blind. No—of course you’d ask questions. It’s too big of an investment, and you don’t want to make a costly mistake.

However, many people who make the decision to become engaged do the very same thing. They don’t ask enough questions. They like what they see and that’s all that counts. After all, asking questions isn’t very romantic...and you may not like the answers.

The fact is, though, at some time you will discover the answers to your questions. Asking them before you say, “I do,” can help you make your decision, save you some unneeded heartache, or confirm the direction you’re heading. The greater the amount of information you have, the better you’ll be able to make a good decision.<sup>1</sup>

I want to help you avoid becoming engaged to a stranger. Yes, it’s painful to experience the end of a dating relationship. But, it’s even more painful to break off an engagement. Hopefully these questions will help you say, “Yes, I really know this person and feel comfortable in moving ahead,” or “I’m glad I asked these questions now so I don’t pursue this. It’s time to move on.”

## **Better Now Than Later**

One of the principal questions I’d like you to consider is, “How is your acquaintanceship?” Yes, acquaintanceship. Jeffrey Larson, in his excellent book *Should We Stay Together?* described it this way:

I define one’s acquaintanceship as a combination of how well you know your partner (depth of knowledge) and how long

you've known your partner (breadth of experiences) before marriage. The relationship between acquaintanceship and later marital satisfaction is simple: The longer and better you know someone before marriage, the greater the likelihood of marital satisfaction. This is because the longer you become acquainted with someone before marriage—usually—the better you know them, understand them, and understand your couple strengths and weaknesses.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the following questions and thoughts, however, have come from those who discovered their answers after they were married. They were shocked, dismayed, and felt deceived. Many of the questions are direct and blunt. You may think, “I couldn't ask that!” You may be hesitant, but why? You may think you're going to offend your partner, or you may be thinking *These seem so unromantic*—or you may not want to hear their answer (ignorance is *not* bliss)—or you may be worrying, *What if they ask me the same questions?* Well, your partner *should* ask you the same questions.

You can ask them and discover the answers now, or not ask them and discover the answers later. It's your choice. It's better for you to be in charge of when you find out because, as I said earlier, you will.

In this introduction, you will find suggestions and guidelines from a number of people. As you read them, they may sound like warnings. They are. There's no other way to say it. They are cautionary guidelines. Perhaps that sounds better. These resources are gathered from my many years of relationship counseling.

## **Don't Ignore the Red Flags**

A friend of mine has a particularly powerful statement about his experience with dating. I've shared it at many conferences, and people find it incredibly insightful. I've asked him to share a few highlights. I believe the following can be very helpful to anyone dating.

In searching for the perfect mate, it has taken a long time for me to discover that there really is no such creature out there. Everything is found in degrees of compromise—*Can I live with*



*this, or can I accept that*, and so on? When I have found one that fits most all of my criteria and parameters, then the question is, *Will I fit hers?* It's extremely difficult trying to find someone where all the gears seem to mesh into place without a lot of grinding.

I think one of the things I find invaluable in dating now is all the experience I have compiled over the years from different situations. I have reached the point now in my 40s where I feel I finally know some of the answers to the questions that I didn't even know to ask in my 20s or 30s. But to this day, I am still adding and updating my list of questions.

If there are any bits of advice I could give anyone who is looking for their ideal mate, it is these: Ask questions of anyone you date and store their answers in your memory bank to see if the answers continue to be consistent with their actions. If something appears to be a red flag, confront it and don't let it slide as "not that big of a deal." Interact with the other person's friends (in group settings), such as on camping trips or skiing trips, or play interaction group-type games. If possible, spend time with the other person's parents (and if any red flags come up, don't ignore them, because their child is a product of their environment). If there are ways of seeing how the other person will handle pressure situations...put them in it (this way you are able to see how flexible they are or can be, and how they will hold up under pressure). Build a real friendship but stay out of bed, pray together, have similar values and interests in things, come to know the other person's faults and know that you can accept them, watch to see how they treat their pets, and continue to interview them right up to the last moments before marriage....

And as hard as it may seem, if that inner voice tells you that you are making a mistake, at least stop and listen to it. Be willing to pull the plug, or at least put things on hold until issues can be clarified in the relationship—right up to the day of the wedding. It is my feeling that I would much rather be very embarrassed and cause hurt to both of us by putting things on hold—or walking away from the relationship right up to the final days before the wedding—than suck it up, be mad, and live in misery

for the rest of my life. Why marry when maybe you know deep down inside that things are not right, or that small things are adding up to be big things but you don't know how to confront them? Why marry just because you're afraid you might hurt the other person by confronting her? A lot of this stuff will come to the surface through premarital counseling. Know ahead of time that some people are able to mask or hide things. If you don't ask specific questions, they may feel, "If you didn't ask, they didn't lie."

As I look back in my dating over the years, I have come to realize how really naïve I was in not even trying to find out what questions I should ask, or in thinking I really didn't have the right to be asking certain questions until I was deeper into the relationship. There were some questions that it didn't even occur to me I should have to ask a "Christian." I assumed she would never have been into something that would be blatantly wrong. *Never assume anything!*

These were words of wisdom that have helped many people.

### **If You Have to Talk Yourself into It...**

On another occasion, my friend said,

As I reflect back now on six months of dating a very nice woman and think of our first date, I realize now I should have followed my instincts and not had a second date. Even though she was nice, attractive, and liked to do a number of things I enjoy, I still found myself having to talk myself into having another date with her and then another. We reached a very comfortable place in our dating, but there was something missing, I just couldn't put my finger on those missing ingredients until now. They were common sense and a lack of being sensitive to my needs! It took me this long to figure out what I had summed up subconsciously on the first date—without realizing it. Maybe part of me is just slow at coming to these conclusions when the other part of me already knows the outcome. I wanted to give this person the benefit of the doubt,

though...And so, six months later I found things no different than in the first couple of hours—except I have now spent six months of my life I can't ever recoup.

I hoped because we had a lot in common, everything would eventually come together with a happy ending. Sure, some things were good, but being able to look back now and see the full picture, those few good things were really like settling for crumbs off a plate when I could and should have been spending the same amount of time looking elsewhere for the full plate. One time I got some great advice that would have saved me a lot of time and energy in this case—*if you have to talk yourself into buying something, you probably won't use it*. So, in carrying this thought into a dating situation, if I have to talk myself into a second or third date, it probably won't work either in the long run. I will continue to search for the one I don't have to talk myself into a second or third date with. (I know there will always be the exception to the rule...but it is nice to at least have a rule to go by).

I am sure I'm not the only one who has found himself trapped in this dilemma, and I hope these thoughts may save someone else some valuable time in their search for the right person.

## Real Potential?

Sometimes we find ourselves in a slightly different situation than the one my friend was in. We talk ourselves into an engagement because we see what our partner could become. This won't work because it's a relationship with low potential. Your partner is not what you want him to be or what you had hoped for, yet you find yourself thinking, *But he has such great potential!*

Consider the following such relationships:

- ⊗ Perhaps he's not what you're looking for spiritually. But you think, *The Lord could really do wonders with him.*
- ⊗ Perhaps his ambition and drive to get ahead is a bit lacking. (That's an understatement.) *But he's just waiting for the right opportunity to come along.*

- ⊗ Perhaps your partner has emotional outbursts a bit too often for you. *But I'll be able to help him get a handle on that anger and depression eventually.* It doesn't matter that his friends tell you the mood swings have always been there and are getting more intense as the years go by. (Look out!)
- ⊗ Perhaps the way your partner eyes the opposite sex doesn't seem to reflect the depth of your relationship. *But once we're committed, he'll only have eyes for me and no one else.* (Are you serious?)
- ⊗ Perhaps the way he handles his finances is a bit scary, especially with all those credit cards maxed out. But you think, *I'm sure he'll learn responsibility once we're married.* In fact, didn't he offer to open a joint checking account and credit card with you so the two of you could learn to more closely work together financially? (That will be a real learning experience for you—like the Road to Bankruptcy 101! Do you really expect marriage to create a miracle?)
- ⊗ Perhaps he doesn't communicate very much or share with you on an emotional level. But you rationalize, *Who would, coming out of that abusive, alcoholic, dysfunctional background?* You've met his parents and they're both cases out of a mental-health textbook. In time, you expect to fill in all those gaps for your partner and he'll become a whole person. (Of course, there may be nothing left of you, either.)
- ⊗ Perhaps the reason he has jumped from relationship to relationship is that no one has ever really cared for him enough, been truly accepting of him, or encouraged him to grow spiritually. *Getting him involved in my church and Bible study should make a difference.*

If you believe in all of these possibilities, then the problem is not the other person. You know who it is...you!

First of all, you can't reshape, remake, and reconstruct another person to this degree. You can't get gold out of a mine that's filled with lead. I've

seen people in marriages like this. They end up frustrated, and critical, feeling betrayed and hopelessly trapped. They plead, beg, shout, and threaten their partner, but to no avail.

Why would anyone fool themselves to this degree? Some people feel called to be reformers—they like to reshape others, or at least try to. In doing so, they ease the pain of looking at some of the issues of their own lives.<sup>3</sup>

## **Every Morning at Breakfast**

In the book *There Goes the Bride—Making Up Your Mind, Calling it Off and Moving On*, the following suggestions were made. Please consider them carefully:

- ⊗ “If you have mixed feelings about engagement, don’t! You need to be certain. If you get engaged, listen to the feelings, especially numbness or dread or just plain wrongness. These shouldn’t be there.”
- ⊗ “Engagement is a serious state. Listen to these words: ‘Dating is one thing, but signing up for the rest of your life is liable to give anyone a few second thoughts. The challenge is deciding if you’re suffering from garden-variety cold feet or what I call, “frozen footsies”—a much rarer malady.’”
- ⊗ “Don’t feel pressured into engagement or marriage because your biological clock is ticking faster and faster. As one woman said about making a mistake of becoming engaged, ‘I was turning thirty and that expiration date stamped on my forehead was flashing so brightly that it blinded me from all the signs.’”
- ⊗ “If you’re thinking of committing your life to someone for the rest of your life, identify the nonnegotiables. Don’t do this after the fact. Consider these nonnegotiables:
  - If your partner hurts you physically, don’t proceed. It won’t get better.
  - Emotional abuse is more difficult to identify but it can involve

lack of respect, controlling, etc.

—Does the other person put you before their parents' wishes or are they controlled by their parents? The scriptural teaching of 'leave their mother and father' includes emotional as well as physical.

—Don't plan on a marriage fixing your current problems. It compounds them. Work on fixing them now, but if you can't repair them...

—If you feel inhibited in what you talk about and can't bring up your needs and concerns now, it won't improve. Try new approaches now.

—If you find yourself saying 'I love him or her, but...' why would you think of proceeding?"

- ⊗ Remember, a wedding is exciting but it lasts for just one day. Is this the person you want across the breakfast table from you every morning?<sup>4</sup>

## Red Lights

There are other red-light warning signs about relationships—warning signs that aren't based on knowing the other person. Some are just obvious common-sense guidelines, but too many people like to think, *I'm an exception*. Exceptions only exist in our minds.

Take a look at the following points. They are indications that marriage is not the best direction for you to take right now:

- ⊗ Are you asking, "Are you *really sure* you love me?" again and again? It's an indication of low self-esteem. Counseling would be better than marriage.
- ⊗ If most of your time is characterized by quarrels and disagreements that never get resolved, marriage will make them worse.
- ⊗ If you plan to live together before marriage, don't. It hurts your

chances of a lasting marriage.

- ⊗ If your partner is like a parent you don't get along with, why would you want to marry that person?
- ⊗ If your partner is all for your interests and activities, but then reacts to you spending time on them, this won't get better in marriage.
- ⊗ Don't marry just for sex. Physical intimacy alone won't keep a marriage together. You need the emotional, social, spiritual, intellectual, and recreational intimacy as well.
- ⊗ How do you feel if you spend a day with your partner just hanging out and talking? If it's intolerable, why are you together?
- ⊗ If you haven't recovered from a previous relationship, you're not ready for a new one.
- ⊗ If your partner has an addiction and isn't in a recovery program, you're not their therapist. And promises to reform aren't a basis for marriage.
- ⊗ If the two of you are totally opposite, what delights you now will probably be a pain in the neck later.<sup>5</sup>

There are many more. If you need them, check out *Should We Stay Together?* by Jeffrey Larson. I would also suggest *Relationships That Work (And Those That Don't)*, which I've written to help couples make better decisions. Actually, the questions in the remainder of this book will give you more guidelines.

Maybe after reading this information, you're even more convinced that engagement is right for you. Wonderful! Or, you could be questioning your relationship now. Either way, ask these questions before you proceed.

I hope the responses will give you guidance about whether or not you should pursue the relationship. That's their whole purpose. All of them are meant to be asked out loud to your potential mate. Responses can either be verbal or written, and I've left you some space to take notes. I highly

recommend that you set aside an ample amount of time to allow for thoughtful discussion. After the questions, I've offered some suggestions on how to deal with the responses. (If you've been married before, please be sure to complete the section in the back of the book, as this may give you insights about your future and your current partner.) This is meant to be a process of "getting to know you," as the song says. Hopefully, you'll enjoy learning more about yourself and your partner.



*Two*

# **101 Questions to Ask**



1. What makes it easy for you to be open and vulnerable, and what makes it difficult?

The answers to these questions are a road map. First, can your partner be vulnerable? Have you seen signs that they can? You want to respond in a way that makes them feel at ease in your presence and not do anything to put a roadblock in their way. Give them every opportunity. Perhaps this is the first safe relationship they've experienced. If vulnerability and openness can't occur here, how can it occur in marriage?

2. What is your greatest fear or concern about being married? What have you done to address these concerns?

Fears are normal, but are they realistic? Where did they originate? There could be good causes for them or just imagined ones. Has your partner ever talked to someone about these fears to gain insight and put them to rest? If not, encouraging them to do so would be a positive step. It's better for them to identify and face them now than for you to hear on your wedding night, "Oh, by the way..."

3. If you were to marry, in what way would you maintain a healthy “interdependence”? What would you depend upon each other for and what would you take personal responsibility for?

Perhaps you’ve never considered this part of marriage. “We” doesn’t just mean you lose your individuality. There will be both a togetherness and a separateness. You need to discuss who does what for whom and what one does for oneself. Boundaries do exist in marriage. It’s like a property line. It distinguishes what is your emotional and personal property line. If someone crosses the line, you feel violated. Boundaries define and protect you. (If this concept is new, you may want to check out *Boundaries in Dating* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend.)