

# Recipe for a healthy marriage

*Marriage Week 2019 is all about the best 'ingredients' for a healthy relationship. We want to get people thinking about the recipe for a stable and loving marriage. And we want to get them spending fun time together by cooking. It works on two levels, which we are very pleased about!*

## Introduction

Have you ever seen what happens when young children are given free-reign in the kitchen? Not with the cooker, and knives and other kitchen equipment, of course, but with the ingredients?

Give them a large bowl, and a wooden spoon, and no directions, and all manner of foodstuffs will get poured in and mixed together:

Flour, cornflakes, orange juice, pasta, jam, pulses, food colouring...

All great fun, but completely inedible!

Sometimes, relationships can be a bit like this...

Full of all kinds of attitudes and experiences and behaviours...

Great fun for a while, perhaps – but ending up, sadly, as a bit of a mess...

Something that could have been nourishing just gets thrown away.

If you want to cook good food, then you need the right ingredients, in the right quantities, combined in the right way.

And in same way, if you want a strong, stable happy marriage, then you need to ensure that there's a good balance of some key ingredients.

During this year's *Marriage Week*, we're focussing on six ingredients in particular.

It's not that these are the *only* ingredients that make up a healthy marriage, but they are perhaps the most fundamental – the equivalent, if you like, of your store cupboard essentials.

So, in no particular order (as they say on *Strictly*) here are the six ingredients necessary for a healthy marriage: commitment, friendship, communication, kindness, forgiveness and intimacy.

## Commitment

First ingredient: commitment...

*Because marriage is for life – and life will test us.*

A marriage is founded, first and foremost, not on feelings of love and romance – important as these may be – but on commitment.

Two people don't suddenly find themselves married simply by staying together long enough.

It requires the couple to make a conscious decision to pledge themselves to each other.

It is a formal commitment, made before witnesses, in the eyes of the law – and, for many, a sacred commitment made before God.

*For better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health...*

This is a recognition – right at the start of a couple’s married life together – that it’s not all going to be “sunshine and rainbows”.

Sadly, there will be troubles ahead.

There may be the temptation to give up, to bail out – to feel we have a right to look elsewhere for greater happiness, an easier life.

But no...

*For better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health...*

Such a commitment might seem to some like a straitjacket, confining the couple to this one relationship for the rest of their lives – when who knows what the future may bring?

This is one of the main objections to the institution of marriage – that it is, indeed, an institution – not unlike a prison!

Perhaps this is not completely surprising.

In the original Greek of the New Testament, the word used when talking about the *commitment* of marriage <sup>[1 Corinthians 7:27]</sup> is the same one used of John the Baptist when he is arrested, *bound* and imprisoned <sup>[Matthew 14:3]</sup>.

The commitment of marriage does indeed bind a couple to each other.

And yet, this doesn’t need to be a bad thing. Far from it...

When God speaks the strength of his commitment to his people, he speaks of binding them to himself, as a belt is bound round the waist. <sup>[Jeremiah 13:11]</sup>

This level of commitment allows both partners to rest secure in their relationship, knowing that, whatever the difficulties, there’s every chance it will hold fast.

As the writer of Ecclesiastes put it, “a cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” <sup>[Ecclesiastes 4:12]</sup>

A couple bound to each other and bound together with God.

## Friendship

Ingredient number two: friendship...

*Because, ultimately, we have to get along and enjoy each other's company.*

Close, loving relationships are characterised by friendship:

- “The Lord would speak to Moses *face to face*, as one speaks to a friend.” <sup>[Exodus 33:11]</sup>
- Jesus “came eating and drinking... a friend of tax collectors and sinners” <sup>[Matthew 11:19]</sup>
- Jesus called his disciples his friends, because he made known to them everything he learned from this Father. <sup>[John 15:15]</sup>

Speaking face to face; eating and drinking together; sharing deeply of ourselves – this is the kind of friendship that makes a marriage.

Friendship is “a bond of mutual affection; a state of mutual trust and support.” (OED)

It is, by definition, *mutual* – that is to say, a friendship must be shared. It is just not possible to have a one-sided friendship.

In a true friendship there is affection on both sides, trust on both sides, support on both sides.

As we have seen, the marriage relationship fosters such mutual trust, through the sense of security that each partner gives the other in the commitment of their marriage vows.

It is that commitment allows friendship to flourish.

As the proverb says, “a friend loves at all times” [Proverbs 17:17] – loves, and keeps on loving, even when times are bad.

A married couple will always be *there* for each other, and always be *for* each other – supporting each other and encouraging each other and building each other up.

Growing in their friendship and strengthening their bond of mutual affection.

## Kindness

Third ingredient: kindness...

*Because saying we care means nothing if we don't demonstrate that we do.*

The Book of Proverbs tells us that “anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up.” [Proverbs 12:25]

And we know the truth of this. But words alone are not enough.

It's a start to *think* kind thoughts. It's good to *say* kind words. But most important of all is to *do* kind things.

Jesus summed this up in what has become known as the Golden Rule: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” [Matthew 7:12]

Treat others as you would wish to be treated.

Be generous and considerate.

Be kind.

This is true, of course, of all our relationships and meetings with others – but especially, perhaps, in marriage.

Familiarity may not breed contempt, but it can too easily cause us to be careless of our relationship and indifferent to our partner.

Kindness is the antidote to such unthinking behaviour.

It is one of the key characteristics of love, so familiar from the passage often read at weddings: “Love is patient, love is kind...” [1 Corinthians 13:4a]

Kindness is also one of the fruits of the Spirit [Galatians 5:22]. How we are on the outside reveals how we are on the inside. As Jesus said, “every good tree bears good fruit.” [Matthew 12:33] This goes for relationships as much as for individuals. A good relationship will be characterised by kindness.

And in this, a couple lives out something of God's relationship with his people:

“I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. I will build you up again, and you [will] go out to dance with the joyful.” [Jeremiah 31:3-4]

Everlasting love, expressed through unfailing kindness, which builds each other up, and brings forth joy.

## Communication

Ingredient number four: communication...

*Because we treat and support people better when we know how they feel.*

Communication is crucial:

“In the beginning was the *Word*, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” [John 1:1,14]

Jesus – the *Word* of God – came to *communicate* the truth about God and his kingdom, not only through what he said, but in what he did, and in who he was.

As he said, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” [John 14:9]

If God went to such lengths to communicate his truth to us, then surely, we must try to communicate clearly with each other?

Secure in the trust that stems from true commitment and friendship, a couple should be able to share honestly with each other what they really think and feel.

Yes, sadly, there is always the risk of misunderstanding, hurt, and rejection.

But this is much less likely if the couple have established a habit of openness with each other. If communication is woven throughout their marriage.

And, as with Jesus, they will speak to each other through more than words.

Words matter, of course. As James so wisely says, “Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.” [James 3:10]

But more than this, a couple will communicate through their actions – what they do for each other, and how they treat each other, and who they are with each other.

In both word and deed, good communication is crucial for expressing commitment, friendship and kindness in marriage, and for providing an environment in which these qualities can grow.

## Forgiveness

Fifth ingredient: forgiveness...

*Because we are not all perfect and sometimes we make mistakes.*

So true! For all our good intentions, we can find it so difficult to be the people we want to be – and to think and speak and act as we know we should. St. Paul expressed this frustration so well:

“I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out!” [Romans 7:18]

Which of us could not say the same?!

Surely, every married couple at least begins with the hope and desire that their marriage will be the very best that it can be. Why wouldn't they?

And yet, sadly, things don't always work out that way.

Sometimes this is the result of something major, but far more often couples just drift apart. Communication breaks down. Kindness diminishes – grievances grow. Friendship fades and fails.

The answer is at once simple and yet oh so hard: stop feeling angry and resentful; let go of that desire for revenge.

In a word, forgive.

“Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’” [Luke 23:34a]

Such forgiveness is far beyond anything we can contemplate.

Yet how many disputes and divisions begin this way? Misinterpretation and misunderstanding. The plaintive cry, “What have I done?”

Even when we feel wronged, can we offer an olive branch, make the first move? Apologise, at least, for the way we’ve reacted?

“God’s kindness,” we read, “is intended to lead [us] to repentance” [Romans 2:4b] Kindness in marriage can do the same and help to heal the wounds and restore the relationship.

“How many times shall I forgive [the one] who sins against me?” asks Peter of Jesus, “Up to seven times?” “No,” says Jesus, “not seven times, but seventy times seven.” [Matthew 18:21-22]

In other words, forgive and forgive and forgive...

Not easy.

And this doesn’t mean that all behaviour is excused, or that there are never any consequences. (Too big a topic to touch on here.)

But still, “be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” [Ephesians 4:32]

## Intimacy

Ingredient number six: intimacy...

*Because marriage is a partnership and the best ones are the closest ones.*

Of the five “ingredients for marriage” we’ve considered so far, four are equally applicable to our relationships outside of marriage – there’s always room for greater friendship, kindness, communication and forgiveness.

The *commitment of marriage* – life long, come what may – is arguably, found in none other of our relationships.

And the six and final “ingredient” is another that the couple shares with no other: intimacy.

Not that we cannot have intimate friendships, of course – but the intimacy of a marriage is something more.

Most obviously, in no other relationship will a faithful couple experience such physical closeness.

Even St. Paul had advice on the importance of physical intimacy as an ingredient of a healthy marriage: “Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time.”

Physical intimacy is both an expression of the strength of a couple’s relationship, and a means by which that relationship can become deeper still.

Intimacy is not only an ingredient of a healthy marriage, but its result. For without commitment and friendship and kindness and communication and forgiveness, true intimacy cannot exist.

The intimacy shared by a couple is an echo of the intimate relationship between Jesus and his father.

We are reminded in the marriage service that husband and wife “become one flesh” [Genesis 2:24] – just as Jesus tells us that “[he] and the Father are one.” [John 10:30]

But this is more than an echo of the intimacy that exists within the heart of the Trinity – it is an echo, too, of the intimacy that we can share with God:

“On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.” [John 14:20]

We long for intimacy because this is what we were made for. The intimacy we enjoy now is but a shadow of what is to come:

"For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." [1 Corinthians 13:12]

The intimacy of healthy marriage can give us a glimpse, a foretaste of that ultimate intimacy, here and now.

## Conclusion

So, to conclude...

We’ve considered key ingredients for a healthy marriage: commitment, friendship, kindness, communication, forgiveness, intimacy.

As mentioned previously, these are not the only ingredients that make up a marriage, but they are perhaps the “store cupboard essentials”.

Every couple will have different “varieties” of these ingredients...

Every couple will use and combine them in different ways...

Every couple will add a whole range of other ingredients to enhance the recipe for their relationship...

Every couple will produce something that is unique to them...

Produce something which, God willing, gives a taste of the greater Love from which all true love flows...

Marriages in which all can “taste and see that the Lord is good” [Psalm 34:8]

And so, in the words of *Masterchef* judge John Torode, “Let’s cook!”