I THINK I WANNA MARRY YOU

A pre/post Marital exercise for Stepfamilies by Naja Hall

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VIP STEPMOM
I am Master Stepfamily Coach Naja Hall and one of my favorite topics of discussion is life partnership and marriage. I won't burden you with the statistics of 1st or 2nd marriages, I'm sure you know them, you've quoted them, and they've made you afraid. The fact of the matter is a lot of people get marriage wrong, I want to make sure you get it right. The purpose of the questions I'm about to ask you is so that you'll enter your life partnership equipped to win!

So 1st off, Congratulations! If you're listening to (or reading this), that means you're seriously considering making the person sitting next to you, your life partner.

Wow! Marriage is a beautiful institution and in order to make sure yours will have a solid foundation, today you must communicate with vulnerability, raw honesty and full transparency.

Usually, the first six months of a relationship, you're dating your person's representative. This doesn't mean they're intentionally deceiving you. It just means that, in the beginning, we all want to put our best foot forward and show our person the best. If you experience some major life transitions during your first 6 months as a couple, that certainly gives you a glimpse into how they handle challenges and tension. The next 6 months represent the definition stage of your relationship. Usually by the end of your 1st year together, you've moved at an accelerated pace, you're madly in love and you cannot see yourself without this person. Your decision to build a life together may be a little skewed by great sex, familiarity and comfort. I am not knocking anyone’s path to love. My mission is to make sure you stay the course!

I am not here to bash people that move very fast because we all know that one elderly couple that got married after 3 months of dating and 60 years later, they're still together. They are an anomaly because if we refer to the stats on marriage success, we know that millions did not make it.

What happens if you go through this exercise and realize that your relationship is not as stable as you thought? Well, you can pump the brakes. In my humble, yet highly experienced and educated opinion, taking a beat and giving yourselves space and time to come to terms with the fact that you're not as ready as you once thought, is smart. It means you're a grown up and you have the discipline to do what's right, not what feels good in this moment.

While you can very well listen to or read this solo, I highly suggest grabbing your person so you can get this conversation out of the way now. I'll be asking you some very important questions, so be sure to not to rush so you can thoroughly discuss your responses with one another.
I'm sure you two have already covered the surface stuff like your favorite colors and your 1st car. Some of my questions will be unorthodox but there's a method behind my madness. This tool is meant to evoke thought for days to come. You may think a question is silly now, but I guarantee you'll be lying in bed one day and all of a sudden, you’ll begin to think more in-depth about one of your partner's responses. For example, when I ask you to discuss with your partner what your parents would put in their lunchbox every day for school, they are compelled to think about some very happy times or some traumatic memories. You'll have a glimpse into a moment in their childhood, which no doubt, set the tone for the person they've become today.

If you wish to take notes, go grab a piece of paper, otherwise, let's get this party started!

Who made you? A glimpse into Childhood

- Who taught you how to fight? When your caretakers argued, did they get physical, did they scream, did they shut down? What similarities do you see in how you handle conflict?
- How has your perception of your parents or caretakers changed from childhood to adulthood?
- Share a happy family moment.
- What was your 1st experience with loss as a youngster? Did anyone help you to interpret your feelings in a positive way?
- Did your parents pack your lunch for school every day? If so, who made your lunch and what did you eat?
- Talk about your grandparents or the elders in your life. What are some of the most profound lessons they taught you?
- What would you change about your childhood?
- Do you feel your parents did their absolute best with giving you the tools for success or did they kinda half-ass it?
- What have you had to forgive your parents for?
- When is the last time you sat alone and cried?

READ: 10 Questions to Ask BEFORE You Fall in Love
What is love?

- What was your 1st taste of romantic love like and how old were you? What made you think it was love?
- Heartbreak is tough and our first heartbreak can sometimes define how we handle romantic relationships for the rest of our days? How has pain and heartache in love set the tone for how you give and receive love presently?
- If you are divorced, talk about the day you knew your marriage was over? What happened?
- How long and why did you stay even though you knew the marriage was dead?
- More than likely you stayed for the kids or finances. Those are usually surface responses though. Children are not relationship glue and they ultimately know that their parents do not make one another happy. With that said, why were you really afraid to end it?
- Have your fears come true?
- Some people seek therapy, others self-medicate to avoid feeling anything. How did you cope with the devastation of divorce?
- While it's a cringe-worthy thing to think about, have you looked over your partner's divorce decree and custody agreement? Child support, alimony, and unfinished business should all be laid out on the table. If you have not done so already, email them a copy of these documents and be prepared to answer some uncomfortable questions. They deserve to know about any contracts you've signed that will affect their lives in such a massive way.

Romance with finance is a nuisance!

One of my most memorable ‘therapists’ was an old pimp that lived in my building back in Uptown Harlem. I don’t know if he was actually a pimp as a profession, but he dressed like one. He was hanging out on the stoop back in July 2007 when I was moving my belongings in my brand new home. He asked me my name and when he learned I was from Memphis, he told me he’d always watch out for me. We stayed friends until he passed away in 2015. For many years after I’d become a New Yorker, I took a moment to chat him up whenever I saw him outside on the stoop. He wanted to hear stories about my life and my day. He’d always offer some sort of prolific Uncle-like anecdote. When I told him about a new boyfriend who was struggling financially, he gave me a concerned look and said, “ROMANCE without FINANCE is a NUI-SANCE!” Say it out loud if you want a good laugh!
In 2017, a research company called Ramsey Solutions conducted a survey and they concluded that money woes ruin more marriages than infidelity. [See study HERE](#)

- Nearly two-thirds of all marriages start off in debt. Forty-three percent of couples married more than 25 years started off in debt, while 86 percent of couples married five years or less started off in the red — twice the number of their older counterparts.
- One-third of people who say they argued with their spouse about money say they hid a purchase from their spouse because they knew their partner would not approve.
- Ninety-four percent of respondents who say they have a “great” marriage discuss their money dreams with their spouse, compared to only 45 percent of respondents who say their marriage is “okay” or “in crisis.” Eighty-seven percent of respondents who say their marriage is “great” also say they and their spouse work together to set long-term goals for their money.
- Sixty-three percent of those with $50,000 or more in debt feel anxious about talking about their personal finances. Almost half (47 percent) of respondents with consumer debt say their level of debt creates stress and anxiety. Source, Dave Ramsey

I know a few couples that keep their mate in the dark about hidden bank accounts, raises at work and extra money that they give to their kids and family. Without question, these relationships have other major flaws too. Let’s look into your money and how it is going to affect your marriage.

- If you are divorced, how much is your alimony and how long do you have to pay? By the way, did you know that if you were married over 10 years, your ex may be entitled to some of your social security benefits?
- Speaking of exes, have you removed them as your life insurance beneficiary? Should you pass away tomorrow, who benefits from your death?
- Should one of you fall ill and unable to work, would your partner's salary be enough to support the family? What exactly is your salary and how often do you get paid?
- What is your debt to income ratio? Do you have any foreclosures, repossessions or bankruptcies? What is your credit score?
- Show your partner how much you have in your bank account at this moment.
- Do you believe that partners should split the household bills 50/50?
- How do you feel when you don't have enough money?
Let’s Get Really Real

- Have you or anyone in your family ever been diagnosed with a mental illness? Are you aware that dealing with a person with mental illness creates hardship and can cause long-lasting issues in your life?
- What do you know about personality disorders such as narcissism and borderline personality disorder? These are more common than we know and should be thoroughly researched. Keep in mind that everyone has some sort of coping mechanisms, but a personality is not considered disordered unless it begins to negatively affect your relationships and daily life.
- Discuss God. Is He real? Is he just a fictitious character? Honestly share your thoughts on people with different beliefs than you? Can you be in a life partnership with a person that has a different spiritual perspective than you?
- What happens to us when we die?
- What religious practice will you instill in your children?
- How do you think kids should be disciplined?
- If you have children outside of your current relationship, would you be okay if your partner chose not to invest in them? What are your expectations of your partner as your child's stepparent?
- Who is responsible for caring for your aging parents? Do they have life insurance and an end of life plan in place?
- What is the maximum amount your partner can spend, lend or giveaway before you must discuss and agree? Does this amount of money also apply to their family and kids?

I hope this has helped you and your partner begin unearthing some of the beautiful intricacies in one another's lives. If you find yourself feeling open and vulnerable right now, then you were a good sport and I commend you! The fact that you were willing to divulge your essence means you are at least equipped to teach your partner how to love you throughout all of the phases of your life. You both will change and experience transitions. The key is to understand that you are now on the same team. Your partner is not a person from whom you must protect yourself, they are the other piece of you. Sharing a life with a person means you need to understand what makes them tick, how to calm their triggers, how to love them in spite of it all. Life comes at you fast and most of the time, your partner will be your anchor and your armor. Other times, you will be theirs. The days are long, BUT the years are short and in the blink of an eye, decades will have passed. Be quick to forgive and quicker to forget. My friend Brenda, the publisher of Stepmom Magazine, taught me the 5-5-5 rule and it greatly changed my perspective. She said, if it won't matter in 5 minutes, 5 days or 5 months, let it go. A lifelong marriage and partnership will require more of you than you've ever given. You will be required to be resilient, your ego will be...
challenged, you will experience fear, pain, disappointment. You will also feel love and security like you've never felt before. You'll be entranced by the moments of ecstasy. You will feel emboldened by the power of love. That's what love does; it makes you grow. Your challenge is to grow together.

May God be with you and may you become the best version of yourself with each passing day.

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P.S. If you need to steal any ideas for your nuptials, my wedding website is still live. Visit www.TonyandNaja.com
My associate, Chris Wilkerson shared his 12 Steps To Marriage worksheet with me. It’s a simple set of rules that will help you along the way. If you’d like to hear more from him, visit www.BlendedandBlack.com/podcast and search for the podcast on Anxiety Relief.

1. ALWAYS give a hug and kiss before leaving the house. Say "I love you" every single day. Even if they know it, it's great to be reminded. It just might be what sets the tone for a wonderful rest of the day. Sometimes it will turn around a rough start to the morning.

2. Never lie to your spouse. PERIOD. This includes omitting the truth. A single lie discovered is enough to create contagious doubt over every other truth expressed. Trust your partner with everything, even your fears, inadequacies, resentments, self-doubts, etc. Let them in, let them know, let them accept you with all of them, too.

3. If you have to argue, do it lovingly. Don’t go to the extremes (always and never ARE extreme statements!) i.e. "fine, you're always right" or "it's all my fault", when you don't mean it. Learn to shush and listen. And by listen, I don't mean sitting quietly because you are waiting for your turn to talk, it's actually hearing what the person has to say.

   “Listen to understand, NOT listen to interrupt.”

4. Get really good at sex. You’ve got all the time in the world to get really, really good, not just at sex in general, but at having sex with your one particular partner. There are very few (although they can be significant) reasons to hold back, or be embarrassed, or not ask questions, and get everything working properly. There’s absolutely no excuse for letting years drag on without becoming fully skilled, compatible, gifted partners for each other. It makes everything so much better. Does talking about this make you uncomfortable? How uncomfortable would it make you to know that your spouse is secretly, silently ‘dissatisfied’ or ‘just okay’ with your sexual intimacy? COMMUNICATE!

5. Be proud and brag. Let your spouse hear you talking about them in glowing terms to other people. Be silly and sappy. Be obvious. It will mean everything. You can stay married forever if you show this kind of adoration.
6. A ‘real man’ never stops trying to court his wife. This goes both ways.

7. Stop thinking temporarily. Marriage is not conditional. It’s permanent. Your spouse will be with you until you die. That is a given. It sounds obvious, but really making it a given is hard. Don’t tend to think in “ifs” and “thens”. "If he does this, I won’t tolerate it. If I do this, he’ll leave me. If I get fat. If I change jobs. If he says mean things. If he doesn’t pay more attention." It’s natural, especially in the beginning of a marriage, to keep those doubts in your head. But the sooner you can let go of the idea that marriage is temporary, and will end if certain awful conditions are met, or if your expectations aren’t met, the sooner you will let go of all kinds of conflict and stress. Yes, you may find yourself in a horrible situation where it’s absolutely necessary to get a divorce. But going into it with divorce in the back of your mind, even in the way way, way back of your mind, is going to cause a lot of unnecessary angst. Accept that you’re going to stay together, and thrive together! Inhabit that and figure out how to make THAT work, instead of living with the “what ifs” and “in case ofs”

8. Touch your spouse several times during the day. And I don’t necessarily mean it in an intimate way! Just a touch on the arm or back gives you that connection that you need. The power of touch is SO important. **Skin to skin contact releases oxytocin in the brain. (Bonding chemical – think childbirth, skin to skin time). We need oxytocin!**

9. Apologizing does not always mean you are wrong, it just means that you value your relationship more than your ego.

10. Do not put yourself in trouble’s way. Leave your exes alone. I’m sure you’re trustworthy. Aren’t we all? The thing is, there’s absolutely no reason to test it. Your partner and your marriage are more valuable than any friendship. Any friendship that troubles the marriage should be over immediately. Protect it with knives and teeth, not because it’s fragile but because it’s precious. Don’t mess around with a “hall pass” or a “harmless flirtation.” Adultery isn’t an event, it’s a process with an event at the end. Don’t put your feet on a path that could lead someplace bad.
11. Don’t mix bad words/names with a bad mood. You'll have many opportunities to change a mood, but you'll never get the opportunity to replace names called. Take a break in a separate room if you need to be calmer. Use coping skills!

12. The times you feel the furthest apart are when you need to get away, just the two of you, to remind you why you fell in love in the first place. It’s still there. Rekindle it. Nurture it. Grow it.