MARRIAGE BY DESIGN
Design your marriage before it begins

BLUEPRINT FOUNDATIONS BUILDING BLOCKS WEATHERPROOFING BUILT TO LAST

COUPLE HANDBOOK
Firstly, congratulations on your engagement! We hope the wedding plans are going well. You may be finding that it’s a lot of fun, or perhaps more time-consuming than you had expected. It’s great that you’ve taken time out from all the wedding preparations to look beyond the big day and think about your married life together.

Whether you’re watching the DVD at home, or attending a *Marriage by Design* event, we hope you find what we cover really helpful. There will be interviews and tips on marriage, but also time for you to chat in private with each other about what you want your married life to be like. This handbook will help you, and we hope that, in the future, you’ll enjoy looking at it and being reminded of when you spent time designing your marriage.
INTRODUCTION

Imagine that you and your partner are going to build a new house for your married life together. Planning for your marriage is a bit like designing, building and decorating that house. You’ll have different ideas about what you think will work best and you may need to compromise on some things, but this will make the end result much more creative and interesting – and unique to you as a couple.

Throughout Marriage by Design you’ll have time to discuss the different topics together. This handbook summarises the key points and includes a number of activities. As you work through the content you’ll be directed to individual activities. Each activity will give you time to spend thinking about how you’d like your marriage to be and the opportunity to discuss this with your partner.

At the end of each session there is a ‘Drawing Board’ activity. This is designed to give you time to reflect on and discuss what you’ve heard in that session. The ‘Drawing Board’ will ask a question to prompt discussion, but feel free to use this time to discuss anything else that you think is most relevant to you from what you’ve heard so far.

Activity 1: Getting started
Take five minutes to discuss the following together:

- What first attracted you to one another?
- What are you most looking forward to on your wedding day?
- What is the one thing you are hoping to get out of Marriage by Design?

Activity 2: Why we’re getting married
Choose which three of the following statements are most important to you. Afterwards, compare your answers with your partner’s answers and discuss the statements you’ve chosen.

Marriage is important to me because:

- I love my partner and want us to spend our lives together.
- I want to show other people our commitment to each other.
- I want to have children or get married for the sake of our children.
- I want to have a special wedding day.
- It’s an important tradition.
- It’s the natural progression in our relationship.
- It will make my family happy.
- I want to make our relationship official.

Everyone brings different things into a marriage. Thinking about what marriage means to us can often highlight some of the hopes, dreams and expectations we may have for married life. Expectations can be influenced by any number of things, but are often shaped by personal values and previous experiences, particularly the homes we grew up in. So you will need to decide what you will bring with you into your marriage relationship and what you will leave behind.

BLUEPRINT
DESIGNING YOUR FUTURE TOGETHER

Marriage is a new stage in life. Regardless of your current circumstances, the decision to get married marks a new stage in your relationship.

Every marriage is different because it is made up of two people from different backgrounds and experiences.

Thinking about a plan for your marriage will help you to decide as a couple what you would like it to look like.

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Activity 3: Our expectations

Look at the following statements and circle ‘True’ or ‘False’ for each one. Then put a square around the answer that you think your partner would choose.

- We should make important decisions together.  True  False
- I like to have time on my own each day.  True  False
- I like to go out with friends most weekends.  True  False
- I would like to have children, or more children.  True  False
- I like to try and save money each month.  True  False
- We should both initiate sex regularly.  True  False
- We should both see our families regularly.  True  False
- I would like to achieve a lot in my work.  True  False
- I like to do regular exercise.  True  False
- I think we should give regularly to charity.  True  False
- I think we should split the housework equally.  True  False

Compare your answers and discuss any that you and your partner have answered differently.

Drawing Board

Think about the things you’ve talked about so far, your expectations and your values. Make a note of one thing that you share and one thing that is different. Talk about how you could try to develop and make the most of the things you agree on, and how you can work on those areas in which you differ.
Being good friends and valuing each other creates the foundations for a great marriage. Like deep foundations, the more we invest in our friendship with each other, the stronger our marriage will be.

**Activity 4: Why I appreciate you**

Individually think about some of the differences between you and your partner – particularly those things that you would happily change (but nothing too serious). Now try to find a positive way of looking at them.

For example:

- You think: ‘They are always washing the car, even if it doesn’t need it. I don’t understand it.’ You could think: ‘They really look after our things and they’ll last longer.’
- You think: ‘They do everything in such detail. I find it frustrating.’ You could think: ‘I know that things will be well planned and that he or she wants the best for us.’

Write down your examples and then share them with each other.

It is impossible to maintain and develop a friendship without spending quality time with someone. Quality time together doesn’t just happen by chance, and yet it is so important in a marriage because this is when we get the best of each other.

**Activity 5: Our date nights**

Write down three of the best dates you have been on as a couple so far. Share these, and why you enjoyed them, with each other.

1. 

2. 

3.
Discuss and write down five activities that you’d like to do together on date nights when you are married.

1. 

2. 

3. 

4. 

5. 

**Drawing Board**

Are you happy with the amount of time you spend together or are there some things you’d like to change? If you struggle to spend quality time together, what can you do in the future to make time for each other each week? Discuss this with your partner.
Communication is the way that couples connect with each other and it forms the building blocks of a great marriage. People communicate in different ways, through talking and listening, as well as signs, facial expressions and body language.

Good communication is a vital part of any healthy relationship, but it’s amazing how difficult communicating well can be sometimes. We often communicate in negative ways with each other. These can include:

• being critical
• being sarcastic
• nagging
• being dismissive
• deliberately withdrawing and shutting down
• putting the other person down

Communication checklist

Don’t
• Make assumptions
• Treat what your partner says as trivial
• Interrupt

Do
• Think before you speak
• Pick a good time to speak
• Get rid of distractions

Activity 6: How we communicate

Take a few minutes to think about the do’s and don’ts in the ‘Communication checklist’ opposite. Highlight one ‘Don’t’ that you know you are more likely to do. What can you do to make sure it happens as little as possible? For example, if you know you’re an interrupter, you might find the following technique helpful – especially during important conversations.

Take an object – it could be a cushion, a book or anything else that is easy to hold. The person holding the object is the only one allowed to speak. The other person waits until the first hands the object over to them. Now it’s their turn to speak. You might not need to do this in everyday conversations, but if there is something important you need to talk about it can be a useful tool.

Talk together about how you can help each other communicate more effectively.

Key issues: Sex

There are four common myths about sex, which can sometimes influence our ideas about what our sex lives should be like:

• Myth 1: Sex is always absolutely fabulous.
• Myth 2: Great sex is always spontaneous.
• Myth 3: Working on our relationship doesn’t matter.
• Myth 4: We are the only ones with problems.
Key issues: Children

Here are some topics that it’s helpful for couples to discuss before they get married.

- Whether you plan to have children (or more children), when, and how many?
- How you would feel if you found out that you couldn’t have children.
- How your lives will change as a result of having children (for example, which hobbies you may need to spend less time on, or how you will divide the childcare).
- Your parenting styles. For example, would you be laid-back about things or do you think you’d be strict? Your opinion will probably be affected by your upbringing.

Activity 7: Key issues in communication

Take some time now to discuss a topic that is important to you. It could be about sex, children, or something else completely. Take 10 minutes to discuss the issue, remembering the tips for effective communication. If you’re not sure where to begin, here are some discussion starters.

Sex
- Do you find it hard to discuss sex? If so, why do you think this is?
- Do you think it will be important to set time aside for sex when you are married?
- What kind of things could you do to help build intimacy in your marriage?

Children
- Do you want children (or more children)? If so, when would you like to start?
- How many children would you like to have?
- How would you feel if things don’t turn out quite as you hope?

Love languages

In his book *The 5 Love Languages*, relationship expert Dr Gary Chapman suggests that there are five ways in which people commonly express love: through words, gifts, actions, time or touch.

Words
If your love language is words, reassuring and encouraging words or compliments will communicate love really powerfully to you. An insult or unkind word will also have a greater effect on you than for someone who doesn’t find words as important.

Gifts
If your love language is gifts, you will tend to appreciate the thoughtfulness and effort behind a gift as much as the gift itself. The value of the gift isn’t necessarily important to you, as you will appreciate small, spontaneous gifts that show that you are cared for as much as you would appreciate expensive presents. A forgotten birthday or lack of thought in choosing a gift is likely to make you feel hurt or unappreciated.

Actions
If your love language is actions, you probably show your love for someone through the things that you do. It may be tidying the house, washing the car, or even watching your partner in a sports match on a rainy weekend. You will feel really loved and appreciated when your partner does things for you, and you may feel especially hurt by laziness or broken commitments from other people.

Time
If your love language is time, you will feel particularly loved when you get to spend uninterrupted, quality time with your partner. It won’t necessarily matter to you if you go out for the day and it rains. What matters to you is your time together. You are likely to find it particularly frustrating if you don’t have your partner’s undivided attention when you are together.

Touch
If your love language is touch, then holding hands, a hug, or a back rub will be particularly important to you. You will feel really special when your partner physically connects with you, but may feel hurt or neglected if they pull away from you or brush you off when you try to hug them.
Activity 8: Our love languages

Think about a time in your relationship when you felt most loved by your partner. Why was this? Do any of the descriptions of the love languages ring true for you?

Now think about what your love language might be and talk about that with your partner.

You can find out more about the five love languages, and take an online assessment to discover your love language, at www.5lovelanguages.com

Drawing Board

Write down three ways that you can communicate love to your partner in their love language.

1.
2.
3.

Make an effort to do these three things over the next couple of weeks, and see how your partner responds.

When a house is built, it’s important that certain things are put in place so that it can withstand bad weather, and the same is true for marriage. Conflict arises in every relationship. Understanding how you each respond to conflict, and learning the skills needed to manage conflict well, can help you to ‘weatherproof’ your marriage for the future.

Activity 9: How we deal with conflict

Look through the following list and tick all that apply

When I am angry I:

- can get quite aggressive
- like to make sure my point is heard
- sulk or give the silent treatment
- get frustrated if I don’t get a response
- hide my true feelings
- want to keep the peace at all costs
- tend to blame and accuse my partner
- withdraw physically and emotionally
- speak without thinking first
- become distant or sarcastic

If you’ve ticked mostly square boxes, you are probably the sort of person who expresses anger. If you’ve ticked mostly circles, you probably tend to suppress your anger.

Now take a few minutes to talk to each other about your answers. For example, are your partner’s answers what you expected? Do you think your answers represent your experience in your relationship so far? Remember, neither are good ways of dealing with anger.
Tips for dealing with conflict in a healthy way:

1. Pick the right time and place to discuss difficult issues – there is never a perfect time, but there are better times (for example, avoid times when you’re both tired).
2. Avoid generalising or exaggerating (for example, saying 'you always ... ' or 'you never ... ').
3. Try not to bring up past hurts.
4. Try to resolve an argument rather than win it.

Remember you are on the same side!

Key issues: Finances

Important things for couples to discuss:

- Whether you are a ‘spender’ or ‘saver’.
- What you think are needs or luxuries.

Tips for handling your finances:

- Set a budget together, and regularly review it. Spending 10% less than you earn is a good rule of thumb.
- Agree an amount of money you would both be happy for the other to spend without discussing it together.
- Create a financial goal for your family that you can work towards.
- Ask for help with budgeting and finance if you need it.
- Set aside an evening on a regular basis to assess your finances.

Key issues: In-laws

Tips for building a good relationship with the in-laws:

- Remember that you and your partner are a team and that you are each other’s main priority now. Try to make decisions together as a couple.
- Take the initiative in making contact with your family and discuss issues with them such as family visits and phone calls.
- Create some new traditions together, perhaps in how you spend Christmas or Saturday mornings, to help you feel like a new family.
- If your relationship with your parents has been difficult, think of this as a new beginning and start building bridges with the support of your partner.
Activity 10: Key issues in conflict

Pick a topic that you think could cause conflict. It could be about finances, or in-laws, or something else completely. Take 10 minutes to discuss the issue, remembering the tips for effective communication. If you’re not sure where to begin, here are some discussion starters.

**Finances**
- Do you think you are a ‘spender’ or a ‘saver’?
- Who will take responsibility for household bills?
- Is there something you would like to save up for?

**In-laws**
- How often would you like to visit your parents and wider family?
- Are there any boundaries you would like to think about putting in place?
- What kind of new traditions could you make when you are married?

You may have found doing this exercise very difficult, or discovered big differences and can’t see how you can find a compromise. If that has been the case, consider finding some extra support to help you work through the problem.

Conflict and forgiveness

Part of the process of resolving conflict involves forgiveness. To fully resolve a conflict and restore a relationship, we need to learn how to forgive each other. When you apologise it means you accept responsibility for your actions and ask for forgiveness from the other person.

Forgiveness means:
- giving up any desire for revenge;
- not keeping score of hurts and mistakes; and
- choosing to let the issue go.

Drawing Board

Take time to discuss one thing that you would like to do, and one thing you need to stop doing in order to deal well with conflict.
When you get married, whether that’s next month or next year, you will be choosing to commit to the other person. It is this commitment that holds marriages together, and it’s what transforms a house into a home, built to last.

Getting married is an act of choosing to love one person above anyone else. You are effectively saying:

I choose to love you:
- whatever happens;
- however I feel;
- whoever I meet;
- whenever we have problems; and
- whether or not I feel in love.

**Activity 11: Why I love you**

Write down five things that you love about your partner and then share them with each other. Try not to make it things that they do but what you love about them as a person, their characteristics and qualities.

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

Keep this list as a reminder to yourself, and regularly add things to it!
Making this commitment to love your husband or wife will mean putting each other first, regardless of any existing relationships you may have. It will mean making each other a priority over and above other people or responsibilities, and it will also include making personal sacrifices for the sake of the other person.

Activity 12: My promise to you

Many people write their own promises, or vows, for the wedding. You may have already decided to do this, or maybe you haven’t thought about it before. Take a few minutes, individually, to think about a promise you might want to make to your partner to show that you intend to put them first and commit to them.

Share your ‘promise’ with your partner. You might even decide to include it in your wedding ceremony.

Drawing Board

What have you found most useful about Marriage by Design? What have you learnt that you would like to take forward into your marriage?

Write down three things below as a reminder:

1. 

2. 

3. 

Also, take time to decide if there are any things you’ve heard or talked about that you want to discuss in more detail later. Commit to talking about these things together.
We’ve come to the end of *Marriage by Design*. We hope that you’ve enjoyed it, learned new things about each other, and that you’ll carry on planning for your marriage.

Have a wonderful wedding day and married life together!

*Marriage by Design* was developed by Care for the Family, a national charity aiming to promote strong family life and help those facing family difficulties.

**Feedback**

We would love to know what you thought of *Marriage by Design*, please let us know at: [www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/MBDcouple](http://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/MBDcouple)

Throughout your married life together, Care for the Family can provide helpful resources for every step of the way. If you’ve enjoyed *Marriage by Design* why not look into our other easy-to-use materials. These cover many topics including how to enrich your relationship, advice on parenting, and what it takes to survive and thrive when the tough times come – as they do to every family at some point. We hope we’ll be able to give you some encouragement, advice and inspiration over the many years to come.

For the latest news, events and training information, helpful articles and resources visit [www.careforthefamily.org.uk](http://www.careforthefamily.org.uk).

**CARE FOR THE FAMILY**

*The Marriage Challenge* is a fun and informative regular podcast designed to help any couple strengthen their relationship.

*The Marriage Sessions* is a flexible, four-part DVD resource that explores how a couple can build a strong relationship. Each stand-alone session provides the content for a two-hour couples’ event, and the pack includes everything you need to run an event (a Leader’s Guide and four separate DVDs).

*The Really, Really Busy Person’s Book on Marriage* is a great little collection of quotes and sayings. Authors Rob Parsons and Katharine Hill capture the pressure points and the highs and lows of domestic trials and bliss.

*The Sixty Minute Marriage* is a simple and straightforward book that gets to the heart of the matter quickly, plainly and practically. It is an invaluable help for every couple at every moment in their marriage, covering topics such as: communication, sex, conflict and money. Take an hour to read a book that could change your marriage forever!

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