MARRIAGE BY DESIGN

Five sessions to help couples prepare for marriage

BLUEPRINT  FOUNDATIONS  BUILDING BLOCKS  WEATHERPROOFING  BUILT TO LAST

GROUP LEADER’S GUIDE
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Welcome to *Marriage by Design*. You are about to make a difference to marriages … before they have even begun!

*Marriage by Design* is a marriage preparation course that is suitable for any couple preparing to make a lifelong commitment to each other. It is evidence-based and has been specifically developed to be both flexible and accessible. Research shows that couples who attend marriage preparation classes reap the benefits because they are more likely to enjoy greater marital stability and satisfaction. Our hope for *Marriage by Design* is that couples are equipped with the tools to build a strong and healthy marriage that lasts a lifetime.

On behalf of all those who will benefit from this course, we want to thank you for your willingness to support them in building a strong marriage from the outset.

The aims of *Marriage by Design* are:
- To improve couple relationship skills
- To increase couples’ confidence and knowledge of how to build a healthy marriage
- To encourage couples to seek relationship support throughout their marriage

Over five sessions *Marriage by Design* covers the following topics:
- Values and expectations
- Financial management
- Friendship
- In-laws and wider family
- Communication
- Resolving conflict
- Sex
- Commitment
- Children

**Your role**

The majority of this booklet is a step-by-step guide on how to run a *Marriage by Design* event with a group of couples. The DVD will provide the main teaching and your role as a group leader is to facilitate the discussion. This booklet will let you know when to pause the DVD so couples can discuss what they’ve been watching. However, at the back of the booklet is a Discussion Guide which is particularly useful for church leaders who want to run marriage preparation courses with individual couples as the need arises. Usually the couple would work through the DVD themselves in advance and the leader would then meet them for a discussion on the content they’ve already discussed.

As a group leader, your role is to guide couples through the *Marriage by Design* DVD which contains the entire course content. In addition to this, group leaders should:
- Provide a warm welcome and supportive approach to the couples
- Clearly introduce activities for the couples to discuss

**Confidentiality and privacy**

There is no group work involved in *Marriage by Design* although couples are expected to discuss the content with each other at different points during the sessions. At the beginning of a course, we suggest you talk to the couples about privacy and confidentiality. Let them know that they will not be expected to share personal information with others, but they are responsible for anything they do disclose – in chatting over coffee, for example. Also, ask the group to agree to keep anything they hear private. At no point are you, as a group leader, required or expected to ask couples to feedback what they have discussed.
When planning to host a *Marriage by Design* course you will need to do the following:

- Get familiar with the structure of the course and decide what format your course will take
- Find a suitable venue
- Set up the room to create the right environment
- Have the necessary equipment and sufficient course materials
- Promote the course and invite couples to it

**Course structure**

*Marriage by Design* includes five main sessions:

1. **45 min** Blueprint: Designing your future together (including the Introduction)
2. **35 min** Foundations: Being best friends
3. **60 min** Building blocks: Keep communicating
4. **55 min** Weatherproofing: Dealing with conflicts
5. **40 min** Built to last: Choosing to commit (including the Conclusion)

*Marriage by Design* may be run over one day, but its timing can be flexible – you may, for example, prefer to run it over two or more evenings. If you choose to do this, be sure to consider how you will structure the course before beginning the first session. If you wish to run *Marriage by Design* over a series of evenings, bear in mind that each session will take up to one-hour to run (including discussion times).

If you are running the course over one day, a suggested timetable is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.15 am−9.30 am</td>
<td>Couples arrive, tea and coffee available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.15 am−11.45 am</td>
<td>Break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.45 am−1.00 pm</td>
<td>‘Building blocks’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.00 pm−1.45 pm</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.45 pm−2.45 pm</td>
<td>‘Weatherproofing’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.45 pm−3.00 pm</td>
<td>Break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.00 pm−4.00 pm</td>
<td>‘Built to last’, ‘Conclusion’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Venue**

It is important that couples find *Marriage by Design* an enjoyable experience – so please consider this when choosing your venue and the provision of refreshments. Courses can be hosted in people’s homes if they are large enough. Other popular venue choices include cafés, hotel function rooms and wedding reception locations. When thinking about where to run *Marriage by Design* it is helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the venue have enough space for couples to sit at their own table and chat together in privacy?
- Is there adequate heating or cooling?
- Is there adequate lighting?
- Does the venue offer calm surroundings? It is not good, for example, if it backs onto a railway line and trains regularly rumble by!
For each course you will require:

1. **Marriage by Design DVD**
   This includes the content of the course, with featured presenters and a range of different clips and interviews.

2. **Marriage by Design Couple Handbooks**
   Each individual guest requires their own Couple Handbook. This is theirs to keep and they may make as many notes in it as they wish to.

3. **Marriage by Design Group Leader’s Guide**
   This booklet is designed to give you all the information you need to host a Marriage by Design course and, therefore, we recommend you have a copy to hand every time you prepare and run a course.

To order more course materials from Care for the Family visit www.careforthefamily.org.uk/shop. Please allow enough time for postage and ensure you order an adequate number.

### Inviting couples

**Marriage by Design** may be of interest to any engaged couple who want to invest in their marriage. It provides a fantastic opportunity for them to take a break from the wedding planning and spend some time thinking about their future lives together.

You may wish to promote your course to gain interest from couples. Places such as churches, registry offices, reception venues, bridal shops and jewellers can be used for advertising if they are happy for you to do so. Posters for publicising your course are available to download from the Care for the Family website.

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**Room layout – creating an ambient environment**

It is your choice as to how you set up the room, but we recommend the following:

- The room has a comfortable and cosy atmosphere so that couples feel welcomed and at ease
- Each couple has their own table and enough space to feel that their conversations will not be overheard
- Tables can be decorated and might also have nibbles, a jug of water and glasses on them
- All couples are able to see and hear clearly
- Appropriate background music on arrival is a good idea and can be used throughout the day when required

**Equipment**

To lead *Marriage by Design* you will require:

- A DVD player or laptop with DVD playing capability (or a downloaded digital copy of the resource)
- A TV or a projector with screen and speakers
- Audio equipment for background music
- Pens, one for each guest
- Course materials

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**Course materials**

- Does the venue have suitable equipment (i.e. projector, screen, chairs etc.) and, if not, can you provide your own?
- Can the venue provide refreshments?
- Does the venue have public liability insurance that would cover you and the couples in the event of an accident?
- At what time can you set up?
Before the couples arrive
Ensure the room is set up properly and background music is playing. Prepare refreshments such as tea, coffee, biscuits or cake to offer the couples on arrival. It is a good idea to have the *Marriage by Design* DVD already loaded up and ready to play.

As the couples arrive
Give a warm welcome to couples as they arrive, offering them refreshments. Encourage each couple to find a table to sit at. As they take their seats, hand each person a Couple Handbook and a pen.

Before you start the DVD
- Turn off the background music and welcome the couples to the course.
- Introduce yourself and anyone else involved in running the course. You might want to share a personal story (e.g. what happened when you did marriage preparation, or were planning your wedding etc.) to build rapport with the couples.
- Run through any housekeeping notices such as the location of the toilets, fire exits etc.
- Outline the plan for the course, including breaks for refreshments and lunch (if applicable).
- Explain that the course involves working through the DVD and that there will be regular activity times when they can discuss things together privately as a couple. Let them know that you will be on hand to explain the activities, but will step away (or leave the room) to provide privacy during their discussions.

Introducing activities
As a group leader, you are not required to present any of the course content, but you will be required from time-to-time to pause the DVD and introduce an activity for the couples to discuss. It is obvious when the DVD should be paused as the screen will say ‘Activity’. It will also tell you how long to pause for.

When you introduce an activity, run through the details of the exercise and draw attention to the corresponding page(s) in the Couple Handbook. Before the couples begin the activity, put background music on as this will help them to relax. The words in italics on the following pages are suggested wording for giving instruction on the activities.

This symbol indicates the corresponding page in the Couple Handbook.

Start the DVD
Click on the ‘Blueprint’ option to begin the DVD presentation. This starts with the broadcaster Simon Thomas introducing *Marriage by Design*. 
Introduction from Simon Thomas (DVD)

**Activity 1: Getting started**

We’re going to give you some time to talk with each other about three things:

- 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?

**Drawing Board**

At the end of each section, there’s a ‘Drawing Board’. In this we suggest a question to chat about, but it also gives you an opportunity to make a note of any key issues that have come out of the activities or finish off any discussions that you didn’t quite have enough time to conclude.

For your first ‘Drawing Board’, think about the things you’ve talked about so far, your expectations and your values. Make a note of something you share and something you differ on. Talk about how you could try to develop and make the most of the things you agree about and how you can work on those areas in which have different views.

**Activity 2: Why we’re getting married**

On page 3 of your Couple Handbook there are eight statements. Read through them individually to begin with and choose which three are most important to you. Afterwards, compare your answers with your partner and discuss the statements you’ve chosen.

**Activity 3: Our expectations**

Look at the statements in your handbook on page 4 and decide whether they ring true for you, putting a circle around your answer. Then put a square around the answer that you think your partner would choose. Next, compare results and discuss any that are different for both of you.

**Blueprint (DVD) – Marriage is a new stage in life**

**Blueprint … continued (DVD) – Values and expectations**

**Blueprint … conclusion (DVD)**
**Building blocks (DVD) – Positive and negative communication**

**Activity 6:** How we communicate

Take a few minutes to think about the dos and don’ts of communication – especially the don’ts! Is there one you know you are more prone to doing? What can you do to make sure it happens as little as possible? Talk together about how you can help each other do things differently.

**Building blocks … continued (DVD) – Key issues**

**Activity 7:** Key issues in communication

Take some time to discuss a topic that is important to you as a couple. It could be about one of the case studies from the DVD (e.g. sex or children) or it might be about something else. As you discuss the issue, remember the tips for effective communication. If you’re not sure where to begin, you can find some helpful discussion starters on page 12 of your handbook.

**Building blocks … continued (DVD) – Love languages**

**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? After this, think about what your love language might be and talk about this with each other.

**Drawing Board**

Write down three ways that you can communicate love to your partner in their love language. Make an effort to do these things over the next couple of weeks and see how your partner responds!
Weatherproofing (DVD) – Reactions to conflict

Activity 9: How we deal with conflict

If you look in your handbook on page 15 you’ll see a list of ways of expressing anger. On your own, take 2–3 minutes to go through the list and tick the ones you think best describe you.

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

Now take some time together to discuss your answers. Are they what you expected? Do you think your answers represent your experience in your relationship so far? Is it important to remember that neither expressing or suppressing are good ways of dealing with anger.

Give the couples 7–8 minutes to finish off this activity.

Activity 10: Key issues in conflict

As we did earlier when looking at communication, we’re now going to give you some time to discuss the topic of resolving conflict in more detail. Pick a topic that causes conflict. It could be about finances, in-laws or something else completely. Take 10 minutes to discuss the issue, remembering the tips for effective communication and conflict resolution (see page 16 in your booklets). If you’re not sure where to begin, there are discussion starters in your handbook on page 18.
After the DVD has finished

- Thank the couples for making the effort to come to Marriage by Design and say you hope they have enjoyed the course and found it helpful.
- Encourage the couples to continue to invest in their marriage after the wedding day. Lots of resources and support are available from Care for the Family on our website: www.careforthefamily.org.uk.
- If you are willing to do so, offer your availability to the couples for follow-up support.
- Congratulate them again on their upcoming wedding and give your best wishes for their married life to come.

Feedback

We would love to know what you thought of Marriage by Design, please let us know at: www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/MBDleaders.

Activity 11: Why I love you

On page 20–21 of your handbook, 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.

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 perhaps 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 that shows you intend to put them first. Write it down on page 22 of your handbook as a statement of intent and then share it with your partner.

Conclusion from Simon Thomas (DVD)
This Discussion Guide is for leaders to use with couples who have worked through the DVD on their own and wish to follow-up with a discussion.

How to use the Discussion Guide
1. Before meeting with the couple, make sure you have watched the DVD and are familiar with the structure and content of the course.
2. Distribute one DVD pack per couple (available from www.careforthefamily.org.uk/shop), encouraging them to watch it and to complete the Couple Handbooks where prompted. They should bring their handbooks along to any discussions – although assure them that their handbooks are confidential and they will not be asked to share with you anything they’ve written, if they do not wish to do so.
3. Arrange a time to meet the couple before their wedding to run through the Discussion Guide. If appropriate, you may wish to combine this meeting with the opportunity to discuss other issues such as wedding day practicalities and logistics. We recommend an informal and private setting, free of distractions and with refreshments if possible.
4. We recommend working through the Discussion Guide with only one couple at a time so to avoid any group work and to better handle sensitive issues which may arise. We suggest that you allow a minimum of one hour for the discussion.
5. Offer follow-up after the discussion if appropriate. Further Care for the Family resources can be found on page 26 or at www.careforthefamily.org.uk/shop.

Introduction
Note to Discussion Leader: Thank the couple for taking the time to watch the DVD and congratulate them on their efforts to look beyond the wedding day to plan their future married lives together.

To begin the discussion work through the following questions:
1. What were your overall thoughts on the DVD?
2. What topics did you discuss which you had not previously looked at together? (For example, had you ever discussed your reasons for getting married or how you will handle your finances?)
3. Which areas, if any, did you find it particularly difficult to discuss together?
4. What tips and advice have you been able to put into practice since you watched the DVD?

Main discussion
Note to Discussion Leader: After working through the Introduction, the discussion can move on to cover a range of the different Marriage by Design topics. Depending on time constraints, as well as the wishes of the couple, you may wish to work through all the topics or just a few.
Blueprint – Designing your future together

In what ways did this section help you to better understand the different values and expectations you are both bringing into the marriage?

Helpful points for this discussion might include:

• Marriage is a new stage of life, whatever our current circumstances
• No two marriages are the same
• We all bring different things into marriage and have different assumptions about what it will be like

Foundations – Being best friends

What reflections did you have from this section on how you value each other and how you will spend quality time together when you are married?

Helpful points for this discussion might include:

• Being good friends and valuing each other is foundational for marriage
• In marriage, we have the opportunity to build a deep friendship over many years
• Spending quality time together doesn’t just happen by chance, and it’s vital because this is when we get the best of each other

Building blocks – Keep communicating

How were you able to apply this section, including the love languages, to how you communicate with each other?

Helpful points for this discussion might include:

• Sharing our feelings or needs with each other can be a difficult thing to do; honest communication, therefore, requires trust
• There are positive and negative ways of communicating but choosing to communicate positively is proven to strengthen a marriage
• Discovering each other’s love languages provides a valuable insight into how we can better express love in a marriage

Note to Discussion Leader: As part of the Building blocks section couples were invited to implement good communication techniques by discussing the key issues of sex and/or children. If they did decide to discuss one or both of these topics it might be helpful to work through the following points:

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 does not matter
• Myth 4: We are the only ones with problems

Key issues – Children

• It is helpful for a couple, before they get married, to discuss whether they would like to have children/more children.
• Many couples face the painful reality that they cannot have children even if they would like to have them.
• Having children will change a couple’s lives and will require communication on how to prioritise time commitments and divide childcare responsibilities.
• There are different parenting styles which can be influenced by, for example, someone’s upbringing.

Weatherproofing – Dealing with conflicts
From the advice in this section on how to successfully handle conflict, what will you take forward into your married life together?

Helpful points for this discussion might include:
• Conflict is inevitable within a marriage so it is important we learn and develop techniques to manage conflict well
• Everybody responds differently to conflict; some will express anger whilst others will suppress it
• Forgiveness is a key part of married life and requires a choice to let go of the issue, rather than just pretend it does not matter

Note to Discussion Leader: As part of the Weatherproofing section couples were given the opportunity to look at the key issues of finances and in-laws. If they did decide to discuss one or both of these topics it might be helpful to work through the following points:

Key issues – Finances
• People generally fall into two categories, either a ‘spender’ or a ‘saver’.
• Couples and families benefit from regularly assessing their finances, setting a budget and agreeing on financial goals to work towards.
• A good rule of thumb for budgeting is to try and spend 10% less than you earn each month.

Key issues – In-laws
• A married couple are a team who make decisions together and prioritise each other.
• Both partners often have very different dynamics with their respective families so it can be helpful to establish new boundaries with in-laws as a marriage begins.

• Starting married life together is an opportunity to create new family traditions such as how you spend Saturday mornings or Christmas Day.

Built to last – Choosing to commit
What were the challenges in this section as you explored the importance of prioritising each other and committing to a life together?

Helpful points for this discussion might include:
• At the heart of any great marriage is the choice to love and the choice to commit
• Within marriage, there will often be times where sacrifices are required in order to prioritise our partner
• Life can be difficult; we have no way of knowing what the future might hold, but commitment unites a couple as a team and holds them together for the long haul

Conclusion
Note to Discussion Leader: Thank the couple for taking the time to work through the discussion and offer further opportunities to meet up if they would be interested in doing so. Encourage the couple to let Care for the Family know what they thought about Marriage by Design by visiting www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/MBDcouple and completing the online survey.

We would also love to know what you as a leader thought of Marriage by Design, please let us know at: www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/MBDleaders.
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.

*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!

www.careforthefamily.org.uk/shop