

Ten Characteristics of a Conscious Marriage Harville Hendrix, PhD

Dr. Hendrix is a psychologist who did a good amount of work in helping people in struggling marriages. Yet his own ended in divorce. And doing a kind of psychological autopsy on it, he discovered that he went into it unconsciously, that is, without thinking – at least to any depth – as to the purpose of the marriage, and therefore unsure of the means as well. He is not a Catholic, though his children have converted and have also become psychologists.

A marriage that is conscious stands a good chance to succeed, and a marriage that is unconscious is in peril.

We should not ignore the findings of psychology, nor should we fail in comparing those findings with the faith. Here you'll read what he said about conscious vs. unconscious marriage, and I'll add some comments to harmonize what he wrote with the Faith. His statements will be in quotes.

1. "You realize that your relationship has a hidden purpose – the healing of childhood wounds. Instead of focusing on surface needs and desires, you learn to recognize the unresolved childhood issues that underlie them. Everyone has something missing from childhood, since parents are not perfect. But many go into marriage having no idea of why they are attracted to their spouses, especially as it relates to their childhood. Many simply bury the difficulties of childhood, but in a conscious marriage, you consider these."

We cannot count the ways of those who turn to surface needs and desires (food, entertainments, pleasures of various kinds) in order to avoid the wounds from childhood. But to consider and consider again things like our childhood is a good thing to do, yet always coupled with acts of faith, hope and charity. Looking back to childhood can be rough stuff, but if we take that journey accompanied by Our Lady, it is most suitable for an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord.

And a Catholic has the advantage of the sacrament of Penance. Should we detect some unrepented sin in our consideration, we can confess it. And that makes all the difference in the world.

2. "You create a more accurate image of your partner. At the moment of attraction, most people begin to infuse their intended with their primary caretakers. As time goes on, many begin to project negative traits onto their spouses, further obscuring their partner's essential reality. In a conscious marriage, you gradually let go of these illusions and begin to see more of your spouse's truth. You see your spouse not as your savior who exists to fill up what is lacking from your childhood or your persona, but as another wounded human being, struggling to be healed."

There is only one Savior, and it is not a spouse. A spouse does not exist in order to bring salvation to us, though he can contribute mightily to that end, or frustrate it as the case may be. To see one's spouse as struggling to be healed however, is an excellent sight. How true this is! And how beneficial it would be to see everyone in such a light...

3. “You take responsibility for communicating your needs and desires to your partner. In an unconscious marriage, you cling to the childhood belief that your spouse automatically intuits your needs. In a conscious marriage, you accept the fact that, in order to understand each other, you have to develop clear channels of communication.”

Little children assume mom or dad knows exactly what they need. No problem for a little child, yet to take this into adulthood is more than a mistake. But to take responsibility for our actions, for our communications, for our own growth in virtue is part and parcel of what it means to be Catholic. If you grow up in the Traditional Latin Mass, you discover very quickly that it takes a fair amount of work to pray it. It says to each of us, “You are responsible for learning this Mass. So if you have been in the habit of developing clear channels of communication with the Almighty, then you’ll be in disposed to do so with your spouse.”

4. “You become more intentional in your interactions. In an unconscious marriage, you tend to react without thinking. You allow the primitive response of your old brain to control your behavior. In a conscious marriage, you train yourself to behave in a more constructive manner.”

This is a psychological way of saying *Be slow to anger and quick to forgive*. And there is nothing quite like learning how to think before we speak and act to accomplish this more constructive manner.

5. “You learn to value your partner’s needs and wishes as highly as you value your own. In an unconscious marriage, you assume that your partner’s role in life is to take care of your needs magically. In a conscious marriage, you let go of this narcissistic view and divert more and more of your energy to meeting your spouse’s needs.”

Down with narcissism! It cannot have a place in matrimony. Of course to value your partner’s needs and wishes as your own depends on knowing what those are. And for that, we’re back to good communication.

Remember, self-indulgence produces fleeting pleasure. Self-sacrifice produces joy.

6. “You embrace the dark side of your personality. In a conscious marriage, you openly acknowledge the fact that you, like everyone else, have negative traits. As you accept responsibility for this dark side of your nature, you lessen your tendency to project your negative traits onto your mate, which creates a less hostile environment.”

Is there anything we can do that embraces the dark side of our personalities like going to confession? Every good penitent accepts responsibility for his negative traits by confessing them. And absolution will create a less hostile environment, especially when coupled with a good amendment of life and ample penance.

7. “You learn new techniques to satisfy your basic needs and desires. In an unconscious marriage, there is a danger of cajoling, haranguing, and blaming during a power struggle to coerce your spouse to meet your needs. But these are self-defeating tactics.”

Boy are they ever. Even an attempt at manipulation of another is contrary to the vows of matrimony. But the examination of conscience can come up with excellent amendments of life, and that change is a great blessing to a marriage. As St. John Henry Cardinal Newman once wrote, "To change is good, to change often is be perfect."

8. "You search within yourself for the strengths and abilities you are lacking. One reason you were attracted to your spouse is that your partner had strengths and abilities you lack. But being with your spouse can give an illusory sense of wholeness. In a conscious marriage, you learn that the only way you can truly recapture a sense of oneness is to develop the hidden traits within yourself."

Indeed, a thing cannot give what it does not have. If you wish your spouse or children had some particular virtue, then the best way to see to it that they gain that virtue is first of all to have it, and practice it, yourself.

And the search within oneself should always be primarily to search for the indwelling of the Holy Trinity.

9. "You become more aware of your drive to be loving and whole. As a part of your God-given nature, you have the ability to love unconditionally and to experience unity with the world around you. Social conditioning and imperfect parenting made you lose touch with these qualities. In a conscious marriage, you begin to rediscover your original nature."

This may read strange at first, but the desire to love all and to be at complete harmony with our surroundings is left over I think, from the Garden of Eden. We had that drive that Hendrix is talking about, and we still have it, though I would say it is a drive to be one with God. We will be loving and whole in so far as we are in union with Him.

It won't do to have an overly idealistic notion of this drive. You can't walk out into an angry mob and expect them to rejoice over your positive message of wholeness. The virtue of prudence must be at work with this drive, when it comes to our neighbor.

10. "You accept the difficulty of creating a good marriage. In an unconscious marriage, you believe that the way to have a good marriage is to pick the right partner. In a conscious marriage you realize you have to be the right partner. As you gain a more realistic view of love relationships, you realize that a good marriage requires commitment, discipline, and the courage to grow and change; marriage is hard work."

Just like anything really worth having takes hard work.

And an ocean of prayer, and an ocean of forgiveness!