

## The Importance of the Newlywed Years

Jerry L. Harber, D.Min., LMFT

I recently read a small research article that puts into sharp focus the impact of the newlywed years on long-term marital happiness. The article, reporting research done by Dr. Ted Huston and others, was titled *Newlywed Years As Predictors of Marital Delight, Distress, and Divorce*.

According to Dr. Huston of the University of Texas at Austin, "This study showed that couples' newlywed marriages and changes in their union over the first 2 years foreshadow their long-term marital fate after 13 years... disillusionment—as reflected in an abatement of love, a decline in overt affection, a lessening of the conviction that one's spouse is responsive, and an increase in ambivalence—distinguishes couples headed for divorce from those who establish a stable marital bond."

The study looked at 156 couples who were married for the first time in 1981. Researchers discovered that after 13 years:

- 68 couples were happily married (43%)
- 32 couples were unhappily married (21%)
- 56 couples had divorced (36%)

The study also pointed out that couples who became disillusioned and were negative toward each other within the first two months of marriage divorced within the first two years. Conversely, couples who maintained positive feelings toward each other in the first two years were the ones who reported themselves happily married after 13 years.

Scott Peck in his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, describes those first several years as usually characterized by romantic love. One of my professors called this "delicious insanity." But Peck goes on to say that biologically humans are unable to sustain that level of romantic love much beyond the first couple of years. As romantic love fades, he says couples now have the opportunity "to begin the work of real love."

It seems then to be understandable that couples will begin to feel less satisfied with each other and with marriage as the excitement of new life together bleeds off and is replaced by the reality of adjustment. Remarking on this, Hudson suggests that couple must make an effort to keep romance alive in their relationship in an intentional way.

At the same time, couples should watch for the following warning signs:

- lack of romance and intimacy
- inability to have fun together
- selfishness
- fear of conflict
- lack of respect
- over commitment of time to other things
- over spending
- too much dependence on parents
- sexual problems
- addictions and/or substance abuse
- emotional and/or physical abuse

When any of the signs are observed, it is critical that the couple seek help of some kind.

Possibilities include

- talking with more experienced, happy couples
- attending marriage enrichment events
- seeing a marriage and family counselor

Most couples find these first couple of years hard, but as happily married couples look back on them, they also tend to remember them as some of the best as they discovered each other and developed the intimacy that still exists.